

THE IMPACT OF REVOLUTIONARY IDEOLOGY ON THE  
MILITARY IN TIME OF WAR CASE STUDY: THE IRANIAN  
MILITARY DURING THE IRAN-IRAQ WAR 1980-88

A thesis presented to the Faculty of the U.S. Army  
Command and General Staff College in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the  
degree

MASTER OF MILITARY ART AND SCIENCE

by

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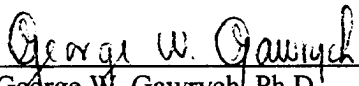
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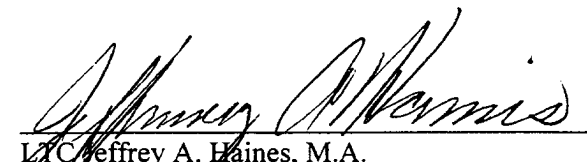
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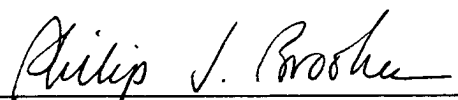
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## ABSTRACT

THE IMPACT OF REVOLUTIONARY IDEOLOGY ON A MILITARY DURING TIME OF  
WAR CASE STUDY: THE IRANIAN MILITARY IN THE IRAN-IRAQ WAR 1980-  
88 by MAJ Joseph T. Gerard, USA, 115 Pages.

The interaction between politics and military professionalism is a delicate balancing act in war. When the politics involves a revolutionary ideology, military professionalism can be subordinated to the point of hurting the war effort. The Iranian revolutionary regime was in the midst of converting its military into an Islamic armed force when attacked by Iraq in 1980. The Iranians embraced a revolutionary as a prime component at all three levels of war, often at the expense of military professionalism. At the strategic level, the Iranians expanded their war aims to include establishing an Islamic republic in Iraq. At the operational level, the Iranians failed to integrate the efforts of its two armed forces, the Army, and the ideologically driven Revolutionary Guards. At the tactical level, they used the zealous spirit of religiously inspired troops, with mixed results. The failure to balance the professional with the ideological was very costly in both lives and money and eventually caused Iran to have to settle for peace on terms short of its political goal.

## PREFACE

It is accepted that politics is a part of war and is crucial in establishing the goals of war even if the political goals are that of a revolutionary government. It is also recognized that the execution of war is best left to the professionals in the military. The German military theorist Carl von Clausewitz understood the interplay between these forces and arranged a trilogy of forces he called Reason, Passion and Chance. Reason in war can be viewed as the application of valid principles of war, the establishment of a well trained, well led, well equipped force that use the most appropriate tactics of the day; and generally leaving the execution of war to professional soldiers. Passion can be viewed as the emotional outpourings of a people at war. These passions normally ignite a wave of support for the war in the form of nationalistic or patriotic support. Chance represents the hidden variable that every nation faces when at war.

However, in revolutionary regimes this emotion (Passion) may create a body of ideas that causes the prosecution of war to be sharply at odds with the military professional (Reason). As an instrument of state power the military is forced to abide by the new, often radical political policies of a revolutionary regime. The repercussions of this clash are felt at all levels of war and may alter the outcome of a military solution. An example of this clash was the Nazi occupation of the Ukraine. Initially the German soldiers were hailed as liberators by the Ukrainians, who sought relief from Stalin's oppression. However, the implementation of a genocidal policy by the follow on Nazi administrators turned a battlefield victory into a strategic defeat. Instead of incorporating a willing Ukraine both economically and militarily; the

Germans had to divert critical men and equipment to fighting a huge rear area campaign against determined Ukrainian partisans.

The synthesis of professional military operations and revolutionary goals and methods need not be totally adversarial. If the revolutionary regime can effectively combined the zeal and energy generated by the revolution with the military professionalism of the armed forces, then it becomes a formidable adversary. On the other hand, the goals of the revolution are often incompatible with established, conservative military procedures. How nations reconcile this differences is often the difference between victory and defeat.

History provides several examples of nations facing this situation. One recent example is revolutionary Iran which barely had time to begin to consolidate its gains in 1979 when it was forced to fight a major war with Iraq beginning in September of 1980. Like most revolutionary regimes, Iran considered its experience with revolutionary war as unique in history. Actually there were several similar examples that preceded theirs, including the French Revolution and Napoleon's wars of conquest, the Bolshevik Revolution and the Russian Civil War, Cromwell's New Model Army in the English Civil War and the Waffen SS in the German Army in World War II. Although not mirroring any one of this examples completely, revolutionary Iran faced similar problems in reconciling revolutionary political goals while pursuing a coherent military strategy. Among these problems were how to handle the old army, operational aims, organization, dual military forces, tactics and training. As with most revolutions Iran's political and military strategies evolved over time and eventually the conflict between military professionalism and revolutionary ideals reached a general compromise; but not after a long, bloody disjointed struggle that cost thousands of lives and took eight years. What follows here is a more detailed look at the interaction between the forces of radical ideology and military

professionalism within the backdrop of a nation at war. Iran will be used as a case study to look more closely at this interplay.



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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Strategy is determined by the politicians while tactics are the realm of the generals. In between strategy and tactics lies the more slippery concept of the operational art. In this middle area both the political decision maker and military professional must coexist to translate higher strategy into actual plans and orders that will be executed by the military on the battlefield. Even in well established, stable systems, the interaction of politics, and the military is complex and subjective. When politics becomes radical and revolutionary that relationship can become even more dynamic, especially when that nation is at war.

Revolutionary regimes seek the destruction of the old order and the establishment of the new, idealistic system. Armies in revolutionary societies are often the guardians of the old order and therefore a threat to the new regime. When revolutionary regimes go to war before the consolidation of the regime, the interaction of politics and military professionalism undergoes profound contortions. The established demarcation between the two forces is thrown out and new rules written, all while troops are engaged in combat. The revolutionary regime may feel the need to be involved not only at the strategic and operational level of war but also at the tactical level in order to ensure revolutionary ideals permeate the military. Doctrine, training, tactics and command and control are all affected by the revolutionary ideology of the new regime. This increased involvement may be resented by the professional elements in the military but serves the political aims of the new regime. If the political goals of the new regime are at

odds with professional military thinking, then the political goals will have preeminence. Often though, the revolutionary regime will attempt to overlay the political goals on the military and justify it as a new and innovative way to wage war. In the Iranian example, the religiously inspired revolution emphasized the human spirit over technological advancement. The results of this on the battlefield were mixed at best, but not without precedent.

Despite technological advances throughout history the human element remains a critical component of fighting and winning wars. Revolutions tap into the raw energy of alienated elements of the population and mobilize them towards accomplishing the regime's goals. Regimes that successfully meld the fervor of this dynamic force with the profession of arms can be successful on the battlefield. History gives us the French Revolution as one such example.

The French Revolution was a pivotal point in ending autocratic rule and introducing the concept of full citizenship for all the nation's inhabitants. The concepts of liberty, equality and fraternity were radical at the time, and they revolutionized politics in Europe. These concepts ended the monopoly of power of the ruling oligarchs, and, according to Michael Howard, "enabled large numbers of the population to see in that state the embodiment of some absolute Good for which no price was too high, no sacrifice too great to pay."<sup>1</sup>

When Napoleon Bonaparte came to power, France embarked on a series of wars lasting nearly two decades and nearly resulted in French conquest of Europe. This sustained military effort was due in part to the Revolution allowing for the mobilization of the entire population to fight a national war. The energy created by the Revolution provided a dynamic force to motivate soldiers in combat and allowed many capable leaders to rise from the lower social classes to high positions in the army. The French also benefited tactically from the Revolution. Napoleon tapped into the force of nationalism and combined it with tactical innovations, such as the

effective use of the Division as a combat formation, the employment of skirmishers, better use of mobile artillery and the employment of the column instead of the line which increased speed and mobility.<sup>2</sup> The organizational innovations were possible because the nationalist loyalty of the army enabled Napoleon to relax the rigid controls used previously by royal rulers to protect against large scale desertions. The new citizen army was not made up of mercenaries but rather loyal citizens who were self motivated.

The Iranian situation of 1979-88 is similar to the French model in that the Iranians used both the Revolution and the war with Iraq to mobilize support on a national level. Much of the ideology of the Iranian revolutionaries centered on empowering the lower, alienated classes of Iran called the "mostafazin" or dispossessed. Whereas Napoleon used the levee en mass to tap into all classes of French society to wage war, so too did the Iranians use ideology to mobilize those elements of society that were repressed or ignored by the Shah.

The difference between the revolutionary French Army and the Iranian Army in the Iran-Iraq War was in the extent that the profession of arms was allowed to operate unhindered by ideology. The tactical innovations of Napoleon provided clear advantages for the French; at least until their opponents caught on. In sharp contrast, the clerical leaders of Iran distrusted the Army and constantly berated the regular forces for their performance. Specifically, the leadership twice purged the military and created a separate, politically loyal force. Over time, the regular Army of Iran was eventually rehabilitated, but not after suffering huge casualties. Although Napoleon was eventually defeated on the battlefield, the synthesis between the profession of arms and the ideals of the revolution were in harmony and allowed for sustained military success that may stand as a unique example.

Not all revolutions produce such a successful synthesis. The Bolshevik revolution of 1917 produced a clash between the ideology of Marxism-Leninism and the established military. The revolution was a direct result of Russia's failure on the battlefield in World War I and the general war weariness that followed. When the Bolsheviks seized power they faced the daunting task of resolving the war with Germany without complete defeat, then dealing with a succession of Allied landings to overthrow their new regime as well as a host of internal enemies who sought to roll back the revolution by violence. Whereas Napoleon sought to use the French Revolution as a means to enhance the established military, the Bolsheviks were committed to the complete overhaul of state and society. The old army of the Czars was singled out as an institution badly in need of a complete overhaul.

The Russian Imperial Army was viewed by the Bolsheviks as an institution of the aristocratic and capitalistic classes and therefore an enemy of the new regime. What Lenin envisioned was a new military that would, first and foremost, protect the revolution and eventually be used to export communist revolution worldwide. From its inception in February of 1917, the new Red Army was above all a political army, representing the workers and peasants and had as its highest priority the protection of the communist party.<sup>3</sup> Unlike Napoleon's army, the Red Army was not motivated by patriotism, but rather by ideology. The goal was the establishment of a classless society and the eradication of poverty by first tearing down the existing social and economic structures, then building new ones using the industrial workers as the vanguard of the nation. The ideology went further and proclaimed that revolution worldwide was inevitable and that the Red Army would be a catalyst in that global struggle.

In this regard, the Red Army under its leader Leon Trotsky saw itself as a unique phenomenon in world history. Dialectical materialism and the history of class warfare provided

a concrete sequential path towards victory.<sup>4</sup> The classless and internationalist outlook of the Red Army convinced them that no other army in history was oriented and motivated as they were. The problem for the Red Army lay in the implementation of this ideology on the battlefield.

The first thing Trotsky did was to recruit old Czarist officers who had supported the Bolsheviks take over of power. Despite the fact that most Czarist officers supported the forces of counterrevolution, Trotsky found several able officers who were loyal to the Bolsheviks. They formed the nucleus of the new Red Army leadership that used a variety of volunteer and coercive methods to recruit competent military leaders at all levels to join the new force. These officers proved crucial in defeating the forces arrayed against the Bolsheviks of the new Soviet state.

Despite many setbacks, the new Red Army eventually defeated the various Allied and counter revolutionary forces. This was due to a combination of factors including lack of unity of effort by the counter revolutionaries, the use of military professionals, and the absolute dedication of the Bolshevik leadership to their ideology and revolution. In doing so the Red Army was able to overcome the contradictions between the destruction of the old officer class system and the use of remnants of that class to attain victory on the battlefield.

Ultimately the Bolsheviks were able to impart their vision of what Russia would look like after final victory to their soldiers and leaders; something the counter-revolutionaries never did. This idea of a classless utopia appealed to many soldiers and provided the necessary motivation to overcome many hardships in the field. Marxist-Leninist ideology in these early days became a sort of religion that justified the cruelty of the Russian Civil War; a parallel that

the Iranians would use some sixty-seven years later in motivating their military in the war against Iraq.

Although Marxist-Leninist ideology presented a framework for looking at all aspects of life, it was officially atheistic. To find a revolutionary army that used actual religion as a motivation it is useful to look further back in history to the English Civil Wars in the 1640s and Oliver Cromwell's New Model Army. In the mid-seventeenth century there was a struggle for power between King Charles of England and the two houses of Parliament. A Member of Parliament, Oliver Cromwell ably led the cavalry troops of the Parliamentary side to a series of victories over the Royalist forces. In doing so, Cromwell combined both tactical innovation on the battlefield with a reliance on revolutionary spirit of his troops. This spirit was based on a new nationalism of the yeomanry class who were recruited as soldiers in the Parliamentary army and also on a religious conviction that they were doing the Lord's work in overthrowing the tyrannical yoke of absolute royalist power.

Embarking upon reforms in 1644 in what would be called the New Model Army, Cromwell despaired at "the profaneness and impiety and absence of all religion (in the ranks) the drinking and gaming, all manner of license and laziness."<sup>5</sup> Cromwell insisted that the New Model Army be composed of all English nationals versus the previous habit of noblemen impressing locals into purely regional forces. Cromwell imposed strict military discipline on his troops and insisted that the government provision and pay them regularly. He instituted on a new system of promotions whereby the commanders chose their subordinates instead of Parliament choosing all officers.

To match these purely military reforms, he ensured the religious purity of his forces by monitoring recruitment. The key according to Cromwell was to recruit men of the proper spirit,

especially leaders. Cromwell stated, "A few honest men are better than numbers. . . . If you choose Godly honest men to be captains of horse, honest men will follow."<sup>6</sup>

Cromwell's beliefs were tested and validated in the Battle of Naseby in 1645. There he led a cavalry charge against the Royalist forces that demonstrated the value of combining military discipline with motivation. Attacking the right side of the Royalist line, Cromwell's initial charge broke part of the enemy. Cromwell maintained cohesion of his force and quickly organized a second charge, something most cavalry units of the day were incapable of executing. This second charge completely broke the enemy.

For his part, Cromwell attributed his success "to the word none other than the hand of God." Although he created a religious environment for his army, Cromwell realized that a balance between the motivation of his soldiers and their professional conduct was critical. He saw the need for reform and the need to fire the men with belief in a higher cause. Following the victory at Naseby he wrote to Parliament on the issue, "Surely God delights that you have endeavored to reform your armies; and I beg it may be done more and more."<sup>7</sup> Whether God favored the New Model Army or not is debatable, but what is not is that the men of that army believed he did and that belief coupled with their discipline, organization and sound military leadership led them to victory on the battlefield.

Cromwell's New Model Army compares with the Iranian military in its use of religion. The essence of the Iranian Revolution was the establishment of an Islamic Republic. This meant that every institution in Iran would have to be Islamicized. Although Cromwell envisioned a Christian society for England, there was no insistence on a particular type, and, in fact, Cromwell advocated toleration of other denominations. The difference is in performance on the battlefield. Cromwell first and foremost stressed discipline, organization and cohesion. He insisted on



arming and equipping his troops with the best equipment and used conventional tactics to achieve victory. In contrast, the Iranians opted to use tactics that produced high casualties and mixed results at best. The Iranians chose their tactics thinking they would revolutionize warfare. The political leaders expected to win with these tactics although they knew the price in casualties would be high. They counted on the revolutionary zeal of the Iranian people and armed forces to accept these casualties and fight on to victory.

Both nationalism and religious zeal fired the Iranians during the war. Certainly most were motivated by patriotism in defending their land from the Iraqi invaders. Their leaders, however, framed the conflict beyond nationalistic terms consistently referring to Saddam Hussein as "Satan" or "ungodly." Beyond this rhetoric the Iranians defined their strategic goals, not in terms of merely recovering occupied territory, but in waging a religious war to remove Saddam Hussein from power and install an Islamic Republic similar to Iran's. This extreme view would have repercussions at the strategic, operational and tactical levels of war for Iran.

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<sup>1</sup>Michael Howard, War in European History, 1976, 75.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 76.

<sup>3</sup>Michael Garder, A History of the Soviet Army, (London: Praiger Publishing, 1966), 32-36.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 49.

<sup>5</sup>Roger J. Howell, Cromwell, (Boston: Little and Brown Company, 1977), 69.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 71.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE IMPERIAL ARMY

The Iranian Army prior to the Revolution of 1979 was a study in duality. On one hand the Shah Reza Pahlavi and his son Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi built up a large, well equipped force that was the envy of region. On the other hand, the structure and organization of the military ensured it would remain basically a feudal type force. This duality created a situation in 1970s whereby Iran's military was an unquestioned regional power capable of exerting its will externally, while internally the military was considered a tool of a corrupt regime that was controlled by foreigners not interested in what was best for Iran. This loss of legitimacy in the eyes of many Iranians would be a key factor in the ensuing political upheaval.

As a result, when the Revolution came in 1979 the military was either incapable or unwilling to intervene decisively in the internal affairs of the nation on behalf of the Shah. The isolation of the Iranian military from society was a key factor both in the Revolution and in Iran's battlefield problems against the Iraqis. The legacy of insularity and reliance on foreign assistance (chiefly American) undermined the credibility of the regular Iranian forces and detracted from Iranian unity of effort in the war. It led directly to the rise of the Revolutionary Guards as an alternative organization to the politically untrustworthy Army, created a situation where there was undue ideological influence on the direction of the war, and contributed to prolonging the war.

### Military Background

The history of the Iranian armed forces is one of domination by outside powers. The first regular army was formed in 1812 by a French general on loan from Napoleon to the Qajar Dynasty. It was officered by Europeans and most of its effective combat forces were composed of Russian or other foreigners.<sup>1</sup> During World War I, Iran was still nominally ruled by the tottering Qajar Dynasty, but in reality power was decentralized to the various tribes and enforced by their own private armies. An Iranian colonel in the Russian supported Cossack Brigade, Reza Khan, seized power in 1921 from the crumbling Qajars. His goal was to forge a new Iranian national identity at the expense of the local tribes and build a modern state based on secularism, modernization and Westernism.<sup>2</sup> A critical tool in accomplishing these goals was a new national Army.

Crowned as Shah of the Peacock Throne, Reza Khan established his national army by installing his trusted officers from the Cossack Brigade in key positions. The Army was first used as an instrument of coercion and suppression to reign in the various tribes. This precedent established the military as powerful tool of the monarchy and established a privileged place for the Army within the Iranian state. It did not, however, permit the Army to have an independent political role. Instead the Shah sought to maintain a traditional, almost feudal relationship with the Army, while the monarch retained absolute power.

Towards that end the Shah established three pillars for the Army in these early days. First, loyalty to the monarch must be absolute. Second, the Army must identify itself as much as possible with the ancient Persia and the military dominance it achieved. Third, the Army must not be involved in the political life of Iran. The result of these pillars was an Iranian Army that relied on tradition and absolute loyalty to the monarch. There was no extolling the virtues of an

independent military which served Iran and the principles of the nation but rather personally served at the whim of the Shah for the glory of a new Persia. This policy laid the groundwork for the alienation of the Shah and the Army from the citizens of Iran.

The Shah knew he had to control the fledgling officer corps in order to shape the Army in his own image. He used both the carrot and the stick approach to ensure their loyalty. Officers received good pay and benefits in the new Army as well as land grants and other perks for the senior officers. Officers had high social standing in Iran and their future seemed secure in the growing Army. To ensure loyalty the Shah maintained tight control over his officers. He personally selected all majors and above for promotion and only chose those he felt he could trust politically. He constantly rotated senior officers from post to post and position to position. This ensured no one officer built up a base of popular support that could threaten the Shah's central position. The Shah also compartmentalized information and played one general against the other to keep potential adversaries off balance.

The favoritism the Shah showed to his old colleagues from the Cossack Brigade impacted the officer corps as a whole over time. Those not selected for promotion to major or higher became second class officers in the system. A rift began to develop between the older, senior officers and the younger, more junior ones. Junior officers were often dismayed at the lack of professionalism in the selection process and the cronyism of the older officers. This contributed to the lack of development of a independent officer corps that had influence and that could be used in times of crisis to exercise a credible role in the affairs of the nation.<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile, the Shah continued to expand the size of the force. In 1926, conscription was introduced in Iran. All eighteen year old males were subject to call up for two years. Most of those drafted were young rural youths who had little social mobility prior to conscription. In

addition to enlarging his Army, conscription allowed the Shah to take young, impressionable men away from the local tribes, indoctrinate them with Iranian nationalism and weaken the power of the tribal leaders. This fit his plan of building a modern nation through military expansion.

Conscription increased the size of the Army in 1926 to 23,000 organized into five divisions. In 1929 the Iranian Air force was formed followed in 1932 by the Navy. By 1930 the Army had grown to 80,000. Most missions in the 1930s consisted of suppressing rebellious tribes and patrolling the border for bandits. By 1941 the expansion put the Army's strength at 185,000 organized into eighteen divisions plus separate aviation units and marine troops.<sup>4</sup> To financially maintain such a force consumed a full one third of the national budget. With so many resources going towards its military the Shah took great pride in its abilities which were soon tested in combat.

During World War II the Shah's pro-German views were not well accepted by the two traditional powers of the region, the Soviet Union and Britain. Fearing Iran could be a link up point between the Afrika Korps in North Africa and German troops in the Caucasus, the British and Soviets invaded Iran in 1941. Despite a numerical advantage in troops and fighting on its home soil, the Iranian army was easily defeated in three days by the Allies.<sup>5</sup> Shah Reza Khan Pahlavi was forced to abdicate after this humiliating defeat. His son, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi became Shah of Iran.

In 1946, the Allies withdrew from Iran and the new Shah was free to pursue his dreams of a modern Iran. Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi had a grand vision of what Iran should look like. He envisioned the Tamaddon-e Bozarg, or "Great Civilization," where Iran would achieve regional dominance through military and economic power.<sup>6</sup> The exploitation of increasing oil

wealth enabled the Shah to pursue this dream. For the military the years following the Allied withdrawal were active ones. The Army had to reconsolidate the borders of Iran, which were in chaos following the war. Azerbaijan and Mahabad had attempted to secede from Iran during World War II and were forced back into the Iranian state. Concurrent with the reestablishment of the Iranian borders was the rebuilding the of the armed forces following the defeat at the hands of the Allies.

The advent of the Cold War was useful to the new Shah in this regard. Strategically located on the border of the Soviet Union, the Shah's anti-communist monarchy was a nice fit in the United State's new policy of containment. The Shah benefited by having access to new weapons and by being considered a crucial ally of the United States. By the early 1950s the United States was the largest arms supplier to Iran. These arms were paid for with money from the expanding oil reserves being exploited in Iran. Over time, a disproportionate share of this oil wealth went towards arms purchases at the expense of social programs. The result was a growing alienation between the people on one hand and the Shah and his favorite pet, the Army on the other.<sup>7</sup>

Under growing internal pressure, the Shah was compelled to allow Mohammed Mossadeq assume the post of prime Minister in 1953. Mossadeq was a populist who had broad support. He recognized the privileged status the Shah had bestowed upon the Army and he set about to change it. First he abolished the Royal Guards, the most privileged of the Army units. Next, he forced many senior officers to retire. This aroused the old guard of the officer corps to start planning to remove Mossadeq to restore their status and privilege.

Undeterred, Mossadeq continued to try to reduce the Army's influence. He transferred jurisdiction for tribal affairs from the Minister of Defense to the Interior Ministry. Previously,

the military had been given a free hand in suppressing the nationalities. As a result of these actions, the Army attempted a coup against Mossadeq. This coup failed, but a CIA sponsored coup with support of many senior Army officers was successful. Many of the junior officers supported Mossadeq and some had gone as far as to secretly join the hated Tudeh, or Communist party.<sup>8</sup> Because of the Shah's promotions system, these officers had little influence and could not stop the coup against Mossadeq. The gradual split had finally revealed an open seam in the officer corps between those senior officers in the Shah's favor and those junior officers who had favored Mossadegh.

Unnerved because events had spun out of his control, the Shah implemented his own measures to ensure he would retain dominance over both the internal political institutions and the Army. He established a new secret police, the SAVAK, to oversee the political scene. SAVAK was organized and run by current and retired officers that the Shah trusted. In addition, he established the Second Bureau, which was a military intelligence unit that kept tabs on political activity within the armed forces. In 1959 the Shah added another policing agency called the Royal Inspection Organization, which also reported on political activity as well as the activities of the other security agencies. The net result was an overlapping series of police organizations each reporting on the other to the Shah. To further his control, the shah also removed all intermediate levels of command and mandated that all military movements be personally approved by him in writing.<sup>9</sup>

Many of the junior officers who had supported Mossadeq or joined the Tudeh Party were rooted out by one of these organizations. In a purge that followed the coup, twenty seven officers were executed and another 134 received life sentences in prison.<sup>10</sup> Other officers were accused of corruption by the security forces as a pretext to have them removed. Using

promotions, transfers, money, privilege, and threats, the Shah regained firm control of the officer corps and continued the feudalistic policies started by his father. He pursued his dream of creating a powerful regional state using oil money as the engine.<sup>11</sup>

By the early 1970s, the Iranian Army was reaping the benefits of oil wealth. The withdrawal of the British from the Persian Gulf in 1970-71 spurred the Shah to fill the power vacuum. In 1971 the Iranian Army stood at 221,000 strong with a billion dollar budget, which represented 10 percent of the GNP. The Army was equipped with new M-60A1 tanks while the Air Force had F-4 fighters, F-86 interceptors and F-5 fighter-bombers as well as advanced radar.

Well armed, the Shah adopted a more aggressive political attitude in the region. Sensing that a political alliance between Iraq, the Soviet Union and India could threaten Iran, the Shah started sending military aid to India's enemy, Pakistan. He also started arming Kurdish separatists in Iraq. Additionally he had troops seize the disputed islands of Abu Musa and Greater and Lesser Tumbs in the Persian Gulf.<sup>12</sup>

By 1972, the military budget rose to \$1.3 billion and then to \$1.5 billion the following year. The Shah added more new equipment to his growing arsenal, including AH1 attack helicopters, UH1 utility helicopters and 141 F5E fighters. These acquisitions further enhanced Iran's military position which the Shah noted when he said, "At present, Iran has a certain military potential... to the extent, so far, no one has managed to trifle with us. I promise . . . that within the next four or five years Iran's Armed Forces will be such that no one had better entertain any evil thoughts about Iran."<sup>13</sup>

By 1974, financed by huge petrodollars, the military budget of Iran climbed to 3.6 billion and rose every year after that. In 1978, the last full year of the Shah's rule, military expenditures reached \$9.9 billion, but more significantly, were a massive 29 percent of the



budget. This was a huge expense for a country not at war. Virtually all arms purchases were from the West, especially the United States, and were paid for either with cash or direct oil shipments. The United States had the most influence in Iran, transacting billions of dollars a year in weapons sales. In addition, the United States sent over large numbers of advisors and technical experts. The American military presence in Iran grew to over 10,000 advisors by the mid 1970s.<sup>14</sup> A treaty agreement gave primary jurisdiction of Americans committing crimes in Iran to the Americans. This angered average Iranians who saw it as another example of unwanted foreign dominance and unequal treaties. This was to have severe repercussions later.

Despite huge fiscal expenditures, Iran's armed forces reaped little benefit and the nation even less. The only combat experience the Iranians had during this period was a limited intervention in Oman from 1973 to 1976. A maximum of only 3,000 personnel were involved and little use was made of the new weapons systems in this limited counter insurgency.<sup>15</sup> The weapon purchases were often not followed up with spare parts and the necessary training support to prepare soldiers to use them. The arms purchasing strategy was haphazard at best and reflected a lot of the cronyism and favoritism of the Shah's inner circle. Retired officers were often appointed by the Shah to oversee arms deals and there were problems with corruption and favoritism. Additionally, the Shah's military did not develop a coherent strategy or doctrine to use the new weapons. Significantly, the services remained separate entities with very little cooperation and no concept of joint operations.<sup>16</sup>

The result was a force that had many advanced weapon systems but lacked the training base, workable doctrine, and internal infrastructure to effectively use them. Many systems were not compatible and there was no overall sense of direction to what type of force was being constructed.<sup>17</sup> The fact that much of the nation's wealth was used in these purchases did not go

unnoticed by average Iranians. The Shah, the military and the United States were cast as despoilers of Iran, lining their own pockets while development projects for the lower classes lagged behind and the Shahs multiple security agencies suppressed the people when even the slightest hint of opposition arose.

The Shah had set the conditions for revolution by allocating too many resources to an inefficient, repressive military, while ignoring domestic concerns. Moreover, the military itself retained many feudalistic practices that prevented it from developing into a fully professional force with legitimacy with the Iranian people. The acquisition of massive hardware was not part of a coherent, long range plan and did not have the support base behind it to sustain it. The presence of huge numbers of Americans did not ameliorate this, but had the opposite effect of reinforcing Iranian suspicions of foreign dominance. Taken together these factors caused the Iranian military lose credibility and legitimacy in the eyes of average Iranian citizens. This lack of faith contributed to the 1979 Revolution and had considerable impact on the Army's performance in the war against Iraq a year later.

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<sup>1</sup>Haleh Afshar, Iran: A Revolution in Turmoil, (Hong Kong: State University of New York Press, 1985), 176.

<sup>2</sup>Robin Wright, In The Name of God, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 43-44.

<sup>3</sup>Sephr Zabib, The Iranian Military in Revolution and War, 1988, 3.

<sup>4</sup>Afshar, 177.

<sup>5</sup>Zabib, 3.

<sup>6</sup>Amin Saikal, The Rise and Fall of the Shah, London, Westview, 137-139.

<sup>7</sup>Zabib, 10.

<sup>8</sup>Afshar, 179.

<sup>9</sup>Nader Entessar, Post Revolutionary Iran, (London: Westview Press, 1988) 56.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>Saikal, 155.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 157.

<sup>14</sup>Nader Entessar, Post Revolutionary Iran, (London: Westview Press, 1988), 59.

<sup>15</sup>Zabib, 10-15.

<sup>16</sup>Entessar, 56.

<sup>17</sup>Zabib, 10-15.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE REVOLUTION AND THE MILITARY

The Armed Forces of the Islamic Republic should be the antithesis of the Imperial Armed Forces. What is important for the new Islamic military is to become part and parcel of the larger society within which it operates- it should transform itself into the people's Armed Forces.<sup>1</sup>

Hojatolislam Ali Khameini, 1979 speech

The 1979 Revolution in Iran was a truly epic event. For the first time in the modern era an Islamic revolution had succeeded in taking power. Under the leadership of exiled religious leader the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the Shah was deposed and fled into exile. In his place two interim governments tried to establish governments attempting to appease the radical wing of the revolutionaries while resisting the push towards an Islamic theocracy. The regular Armed Forces were caught squarely in the middle of this national struggle. Tied completely to the imperial rule of the Shah, the military was discredited and faced a long struggle to rehabilitate itself.

Many in the new regime called for the outright dismantling of the military and the establishment of a people's militia that would closely associate itself with the citizenry. Two purges were conducted to rid the military of the Shah's influence. Contracts with America were suspended and the seizure of American hostages decisively cut Iran's access to its largest arms supplier and superpower sponsor. Meanwhile, discipline in the Army eroded with many troops deserting in the confusion following the Revolution. Many armories were attacked by roving,

private militias and over 300,000 arms were seized by various factions. This breakdown in order was not encouraged by the clerical leadership but reflected the chaos at the time.

While Iran wrestled with internal political disagreements, the Iraqi army attacked in September of 1980, causing a crisis for the Army and the nation as a whole. Materially weakened, the Iranian military was professionally ill prepared for this attack. Ideologically, however, Iran was prepared to fight and its unswerving belief in the revolutionary cause was at times its only effective weapon. The nature of the Revolution in Iran and the political situation preceding the war had left Iran in a militarily vulnerable position; a position that Saddam Hussein tried to exploit. What Saddam, nor the West, did not understand was the extent that the Revolution had tapped into the collective Shiite conscious and unleashed the twin pillars of Jihad and martyrdom. These two forces would be used in tandem at the *strategic, operational, and tactical* levels to motivate Iranian society and the military for much of the war. They allowed Iran to maintain incredible staying power in the face of international isolation, material weakness and unrelenting hardship. An examination of the interaction of political and military affairs reveals just how this ideology both helped and hindered the Iranian war effort.

### Revolutionary Ideology

Traditional Shiism provided Iran's revolutionary leaders with the basis for creating an ideology that was acceptable to many Iranians. The two key elements of that ideology were Jihad and martyrdom. Jihad, known commonly and incorrectly in the West as "Holy War," is first and foremost the struggle within man to be righteous, and secondly a struggle against outside oppression. It is common to both the Sunni and Shiite sects.<sup>2</sup> The second force, martyrdom, although present in the Sunni theology, attains incredible prominence in the Shiite

religion as a result of their interpretation of the rightful succession of legitimacy after Mohammed, the great Prophet.

Islam itself means to surrender one's will to that of Allah and the bulk of the religion's teachings extol the virtues of peace and tolerance. Within Islam there is also the concept of Jihad, or "struggle." To wage Jihad is to fight against unjust oppression with words and, if necessary, the sword.<sup>3</sup> Ayatollah Murtaza Mutahhari, a leading Shiite theologian, described Jihad as both "a garment of piety" and "impenetrable armor of God."<sup>4</sup> He saw Islam as an activist force that could use Jihad as both a physical and moral force, as evidenced by the following: "A Muslim community equipped with the spirit of jihad is not vulnerable to enemy assault . . . . The Muslim community is community of power and force. Islam is a religion of power."<sup>5</sup> Thus, fighting against a materially superior force strengthens the cause of Jihad rather than weaken it.

In this regard Khomeini stated:

Those who fight Jihad against the external enemy never fear superior numbers, for the Prophet said that he would never turn back even if all the Arabs united against him. His cause was the cause of God, and the cause of God can never be defeated, nor is there any turning back.<sup>6</sup>

Islam's basic tenets derive from the body of doctrinal beliefs from Koran and its two branches; the Sunni and Shiite traditions. Both branches agree that Mohammed is the prophet of Islam. The dispute is over who rightfully succeeded him upon his death. Sunnis believe that Mohammed left no specific instructions on succession, therefore the "people of tradition and consensus of opinion" would choose the next leader.<sup>7</sup> Since only God can choose a Prophet, the Sunnis believed that Mohammed's successor would be caliph, or community leader while the Shiites believed the successor also had esoteric knowledge and could interpret religious issues.<sup>8</sup> The Shiite branch disputes the legitimacy of succession after Mohammed as interpreted by the Sunnis believing that Mohammed's nephew and son in law, Ali, is the rightful successor. In the

Shiite tradition there is a belief that a series of divinely inspired Imams will be revealed to the world to guide the true believers. As part of these beliefs the Shiites believe the true successors to Ali was his second son Hussein was unjustly persecuted and murdered when he tried to press his claim to succession. Hussein died leading a valiant, but hopeless charge against those who opposed his claim at the battle of *Karbala*. Thus, martyrdom became enshrined in Shiite theology and tradition.

Although martyrdom is common to both the Sunni and Shiite traditions, it was the Shiites who define themselves as Moslems based on the collective suffering of their branch since the dispute of Mohammed's succession. Shiites consider themselves as the truest believers in Islam. As a minority in Islam they had suffered the most on earth yet have remained steadfast in their beliefs. The holy time of *Ashura*, when Shiites demonstrate their faith by physically whipping themselves, had its foundation the battle of *Karbala*. A common slogan during the Iranian Revolution and the ensuing war with Iraq was "Everyday is Ashura and every place is Karbala," denoting the constant need for struggle and sacrifice.

To Shiites the fight against injustice, however desperate, is the most important thing, even if the result is death for the *shahid*, or martyr. The two requirements to attain martyrdom were to make the sacrifice consciously and to do it for a sacred cause. Mutahari defined a *shahid* as, "The death of a person who, in spite of being fully conscious of the risks involved, willingly faces them for the sake of a sacred cause."<sup>9</sup> The sacrifice is made not just for the successful admittance to a perfect afterlife, but to inspire the earthly community to greater deeds. Mutahari again comments, "The shahid can be compared to a candle whose job it is to burn out and get extinguished in order to shed light for the benefit of others . . . . The shahid are the candles of society. They burn themselves out and illuminate society."<sup>10</sup>

Khomeini was able to use the concepts of Holy War and martyrdom at several levels to mobilize internal public support for the Revolution. At the international level the clerics blamed many of Iran's problems on the West in general and the United States in particular. Khomeini and his followers painted the United States as a great evil that sought to roll back the Revolution. The long standing ties between the Shah and the United States was used as proof of the evil of Westernism and the need to find an Islamic solution to Iran's problems. The continued struggle against this evil was therefore righteous and would require sacrifice to ultimately be successful.

At the national level, the clerics used the Shiite religion against internal rivals such as the Mojahedin, Fedayeen and Tudeh parties. These parties represented non-religious revolutionary forces not under the control of the clerics. They commanded large followers and threatened the goal of establishing an Islamic Republic by offering revolutionary alternatives to the previous Imperial regime. To neutralize them, the clerics sought to paint them as non-Islamic and evil. True believing Moslems were told that the fight against these forces was critical for the success, not only of the Revolution, but of the Shiite religion as well. The clerics associated this evil with either Israel, the United States, or the atheist Soviet Union. The revolutionaries believed that the struggle against evil must take place in all spheres of human activity and is equally applicable at the local level as it is on the international.

Iran viewed its relations with the West as one where Iran represented the oppressed, aggrieved party while the West, particularly America, was the force of evil. Similarly, internal enemies of the Islamic Republic were cast as evil while the government extolled itself as the defender of the oppressed. Taken together with Iran's history of foreign domination, the fight against injustice and the acceptance of martyrdom form the core of Iran's religious beliefs and under the rule of the clerics furthered the nation's alienation from much of the outside world.



The transformation of Islam into an ideological body of thought was a gradual process and a reaction to outside political influences (often imposed on Iran). Introduction of Western political themes such as church-state relations, liberalism, Marxism, capitalism, and democracy were alien to purist teachings of Islam. In Islam there was no separation of church and state. For true Moslems, the Koran contained the universal truths needed to be in accordance with God's will, both on earth and in the hereafter. There was no need for a secular authority to interfere with the legitimate authority already in existence within the Koran. Islam stressed obedience, comprehensive thought, and community. Western ideologies seemed redundant or irrelevant to true Islamic societies.

But like early Christian societies in Europe, there were disputes over the interpretation of the true meaning of the religious truth contained in the sacred writings. The introduction of Western political thought into Islamic countries caused the creation of a political ideology that incorporated Islamic thought. Attempts were made to adapt concepts like socialism to include the historic Islamic view of community. Although there were similarities, the analogy could only go so far due to the historic, cultural and social differences. The biggest stumbling block to the marriage of Western ideologies to Islamic societies was the dominance of secularism in Western thought stemming from the Enlightenment.

Secular ideologies could not mobilize masses in Islamic cultures because they were essentially alien to culture, and therefore, the religion. Some attempts were made by such groups as the Tudeh, or Communist Party, and Baath Socialist Party to combine nationalism with socialism. The trade off that these parties made was that they operated within the Western definition of class, race and economic status, while purely Islamic movements transcended those classifications. Although many Iranians shared poverty and oppression with their Western

counterparts, they could not find salvation in Western style political parties and slogans. They yearned for a comprehensive, Islamic solution to their problems.

Within the Shiite community, Western thought only touched the periphery of the cultural and psychological base of most Iranians. More successful were ideologies that stressed Islamic and, particularly, the Shiite tradition. In fostering the revolution the Ayatollah Khomeini and his followers stressed the Shiite collective memory. In this collective memory the supreme symbols of suffering, injustice, perseverance, rebellion and the final establishment of the "peace of the rightly guided," constituted the core of those beliefs.<sup>11</sup>

The translation of this collective memory into a workable political ideology was facilitated by a phenomenon unique to Shiism. The *velayat e faqih*, or "rule of the jurist," vested both temporal and religious authority in a learned religious scholar, in this case Khomeini. Khomeini developed the concept of the *velayat-e-faqih* in the 1960s when he began opposing the Shah openly. In Khomeini's view, Iran's future ruler must have both political and religious power in order to be an Islamic leader. The *velayat-e-faqih* allowed this combination of powers. Politically, it became the glue that bound faith with ideology by investing authority in the religious leader, or Imam, who had authority over all decisions political as well as metaphysical.

The combination of these ancient cultural/religious beliefs and the modern Iranian political experience made good grist for an ideology that was at once Shiite and anti-Western. The anti-Westernism of this thought was not new. Earlier in the century the Islamic philosopher Jalal Ali Ahmad described the fascination with Western thought as *Gharb-Zadigi* or "Westoxification." His was an apocalyptic view of Western influence on Islam in which the West is seen as a machine that would overwhelm the culture and purity of Islam. His solution was for the people to return to the Koran. Ironically, Ahmad was member of the Tudeh Party the

party that had adopted Western thought more readily than any other. Despite this, Ahmad clearly understood the use of Islamic symbols and negative effect the West had on Shiism. The key was how to translate it into a political body of thought that would appeal to the people.

Ayatollah Mutahari made the connection between religion and ideology when he said,

What will give unity, direction and shared aspirations to the man of today... and to the man of tomorrow, what will serve as his touchstone of good and evil, of musts and must nots, is an elective conscious, inspirational philosophy armed with logic- in other words, a comprehensive ideology.<sup>12</sup>

Mutahari recognized the need to translate the collective conscious of the Shiites into a clear ideology that could guide the Iranian Revolution. The key, as Mutahari saw it, was the rejection of any secular based ideology and attempt to create a totally Islamic one. Mutahari refined this further by differentiating between two basic types of ideologies.

there are two types of ideologies: human and corporate: human ideologies are addressed to the human species, not to some special nationality, race or class, and have for their motive the salvation of the whole human... species. Corporate ideologies (on the other hand) are addressed to a certain group, class, or stratum and have for their motive the liberation, or hegemony, of that group. . . Beyond all doubt, Islamic ideology is human and arises from the primordial nature of man.<sup>13</sup>

Mutahari made a connection between the development of Western political thought with the concept of a corporate ideology. He considered the corporate ideology as impersonal and far removed from the spiritualism of human ideology while Islam's ideology remains human because of a universalistic appeal. Using this as a start point, Khomeini and the clerics associated the Western, corporate ideology as alien to Shiism. They would seek their own solutions to Iran's problems that would be at once, Islamic, anti-Western and human. The human aspect stressed the spiritual and revolutionary nature of man overcoming the physical world. It was similar to the concept of *elan* in Revolutionary France whereby the aggressive nature of

revolutionary man was as a weapon itself. This elan could be used at the national level and by the military in its battle with the enemy.

Once the Iran-Iraq War started the concept of a elan based ideology was transferred to the three levels of war. At the strategic level Iran, claimed to be fighting for Islam against a Baathist regime that was secular, corrupt and evil. Khomeini and the clerics could not accept the validity of a regime that had a population of over fifty percent Shiites, yet was ruled by a secular dictator. On the operational level, the Iranians knew their military was weakened by the Revolution and had to rely on the dedication of its soldiers to hold off the attackers until they could bring their larger population to bear. The call for sacrifice, combined with an appeal to patriotism, could provide the breathing space needed. On the tactical level, new tactics would be developed that would emphasize the human element in combat over the technological. Iran's international isolation seemingly made this the only option as the country had few sources for spare parts and replacement equipment. However, this ignores the fact that at the beginning of the war Iran made no attempt to modify its international position or reestablish the cut ties with the West, its chief arms supplier during the Shah's rule. Iran chose its revolutionary path willingly and believed this path to be correct, even during war time. The emphasis on the human element in Islamic terms was real and reflected a rejection of Western political tradition, and, if necessary, the technological advancements that went with it.

This belief in the Islamic solution was reflected directly on the battlefield in terms of tactics and training. Many in the West would describe the Iranian tactics of human wave assaults in the war as irrational. The Iranians recognized that they lacked sustained technological superiority to win and instead relied on the emotion, or elan, of their individual soldiers. They

considered their position not one of weakness however, but of strength because it would be innovative and true to the core beliefs in Islam.

Iran would use raw emotion as its chief weapon against Iraq. Patriotism and revolutionary fervor would be the glue to hold the Iranian war effort together. Again, this thought would be used at the strategic, operational and tactical levels of war. Strategically, Iran saw itself in a life and death struggle, or Jihad, with the forces of evil embodied by the superpowers, chiefly the United States. Operationally, Iran's campaign plans centered around the use of the offensive spirit to overcome the material weaknesses of the regime. Tactically, Iran believed the sheer will of the Iranian soldier-martyrs would prove the decisive factor in battle.

### Revolution and the Military

By the end of the 1970s, conditions in Iran were becoming unstable. Heavy military spending continued at the expense of domestic economic priorities. Despite a continual increase of revenue due to oil, the average Iranians were still not seeing the benefit at the local level. Inflation, overt corruption and uneven wealth distribution characterized the economy. Many sectors of Iranian society that previously supported the Shah were becoming alienated. The rural poor were most affected by heavy military spending at the expense of domestic concerns. Many flocked to the cities in search of better jobs, which were not available.

The religious elite, which historically had the freedom to run schools and grass roots organizations, was targeted by the Shah's security services who tried to dismantle the clergy's control over the people.<sup>14</sup> As a result, religious opposition crystallized and became political. The merchant class, called the bazaris, were traditionally an integral part of Iran's ruling elite. Their economic power was undermined by the Shah's Westernization efforts. A new class of

businessmen emerged which disrupted the old way of life. The traditional bazaris resented this shift and shifted allegiance to the religious elites as a result.

With a student population in 1978 of nearly ten million, the youth of Iran represented a huge potential, resource.<sup>15</sup> As part of the Shah's Westernization campaign, many students were sent abroad for advanced schooling. When they returned, they brought political ideas that soon spread ideas amongst the young. Most students had expectations of social and economic reform that were unfulfilled. Many students could not find good jobs upon graduation and gravitated to radical political movements. As a group, they became some of the most vocal opponents of the Shah's rule.

The result of the disaffection of such key sectors of society was the loss of legitimacy of the Shah's government. Iran was a nation undergoing dramatic change. Societies in change are most prone to revolution, especially when large segments are alienated from the process. Misdirected oil wealth, corruption, oppression and excessive Westernization threatened the traditional way of life for a majority of Iranians. Only the ruling elites, some businesses, security forces and the military benefited from the Shah's rule.

Throughout this period the military remained the most solid pillar of support for the Shah. Because of his own fear that the military could turn against him, he constructed a force that could not operate effectively because lack of communication. Each regional command was isolated from the others, and the Shah refused to use senior command organizations to coordinate military activities. Instead, he personally interacted with each commander to ensure he was the only one in the regime who knew about the overall state of military affairs. In isolating his senior leaders and requiring them to come to him for personal audiences instead of conducting even the most routine staff meetings, the Shah had compartmentalized the armed forces into

impotence.<sup>16</sup> Senior officers remained loyal to the Shah but many junior officers began to privately question the Shah's legitimacy. These were the officers not deemed suitable for promotion to the senior ranks or those who were influenced by either domestic or foreign university education.<sup>17</sup> When the Revolution came, many openly sided with the rebels.

Outwardly, the military remained a formidable force. It had a total strength in 1978 of 413,00 with over 285,000 in the Army organized into three armored divisions, three infantry divisions and four separate infantry brigades. The army was equipped with 1,870 main battle tanks, mostly American M60A1 and British Chieftains. This compared with 2,500 plus tanks in NATO at the same time. The Air Force had even more modern equipment with 459 airframes including 200 F-4s, 60 F-14s and 160 F-5s. The Navy had three modern destroyers and three frigates. This military force was oriented toward the Soviet threat but not organized, trained or prepared to handle a large scale domestic disturbance.

The Iranian military remained a Cold War force, focused on deterring any outside aggression and intimidating local rivals. Iran's long border with the Soviet Union made it a key member of the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) and a close ally of the United States. The Shah naturally believed Iran should occupy the dominant role in the Persian Gulf region. In 1975, Iran and Iraq signed an agreement in Algiers that set the boundary of the disputed Shatt al Arab waterway in Iran's favor. The Iraqis reluctantly signed the Algiers Accord and were probably intimidated by the size and equipment of their Iranian rivals. This accord would have repercussions as a resentful Iraq would use it as an excuse to attack Iran in 1980.

Despite its conventional power, Iran's military was ill suited to work effectively in unconventional operations. The military did have two smaller scale insurgent experiences but neither significantly influenced the armed forces. The deployment of troops to Dhofar in Oman

to suppress communist supported guerrillas from 1973 to 1976 never involved more than 3,000 troops at a time and resulted in several hundred casualties.<sup>18</sup> In 1976 Iranian heliborne troops were sent into Pakistan's Baluchi Province to battle a separatist movement. After a short while and very little combat, they were withdrawn. The Shah could not foresee how ineffective his huge, politicized, well-armed and inexperienced military would have during the crucial days before the fall of the Peacock Throne.

During the Shah's reign there were many who opposed his rule. The Ayatollah Khomeini was one of these many dissidents. As a respected religious scholar from the holy city of Qom, Khomeini held sway over many of those dissatisfied with the Shah's rule. In 1963, Khomeini spoke out against what he considered the un-Islamic nature of the Shah's regime. In a speech during Ashura, Khomeini stated, "[The Shah's regime] is fundamentally opposed to Islam itself and the existence of a religious class."<sup>19</sup> Exiled to Iraq and eventually France, Khomeini waged an unrelenting propaganda war for the hearts and minds of the alienated and dispossessed in Iran.

He continued his opposition using the cassette tape as his main weapon. Khomeini taped religious and political messages (one in the same to him) that were smuggled into Iran and secretly distributed. They found waiting ears from the slums of Tehran, to the villages of the rural poor, to the impressionable and idealistic university students. This disaffected citizens were eager for any revolutionary message that could change the political system of the Shah.

The Shah's state reacted poorly to Khomeini's attacks. One turning point was a decision in January of 1978 to publish an article in a quasi-state sponsored newspaper that went beyond criticizing Khomeini. The article criticized many Shiite clerics and actually alluded to sexual impropriety by the Ayatollah; something that infuriated many Iranians.<sup>20</sup> It would be



tantamount to a Rome newspaper accusing the Pope of sexual misconduct because the Vatican and Italy disagreed over the disposition of Papal property. Street protests resulted in demonstrators being killed by government security forces in the holy city of Qom.

Then began a vicious cycle of funerals, protests, deaths and more funerals. In Shiism, there is a forty-day interval between the day of death and the memorial funeral. Since the opposition used funerals to protest the regime's policies, there was a constant delayed reaction to earlier deaths caused by security forces. Forty days after the Qom incident, funerals in Tabriz led to widespread rioting. The Shah's response was to use the military, resulting in further deaths and injuries. This created an atmosphere of constant tension as one funeral followed another. In 1978 there were demonstrations in fifty-five cities leading to dozens of deaths, the arrest of hundreds, and a continual cycle of violence.<sup>21</sup> Khomeini and other opposition leaders continued to hammer home the themes of Islam, the rights of the dispossessed, and the corruption and foreign domination of the Shah and his coterie.<sup>22</sup>

On 7 September 1978, the Shah declared martial law in an effort to regain control of the situation. The next day thousands of demonstrators took to the streets of Teheran, many unaware of the martial law declaration. The Army opened fire on the demonstrators, killing hundreds. The Army's actions on what was to be known as Bloody Friday caused its reputation irreparable harm in the eyes of many Iranians. Despite incidents such as Bloody Friday, the Shah did not commit the military to wholesale repression of the demonstrators, even though he had the support of most senior commanders. One reason for the Shah's reluctance was the basic structure of the military that he himself had fostered. He could not trust the military and feared a coup if it became too independent. To prevent that he ensured its basic organization remained

feudal, non-professional and loyal to him personally. In doing so he prevented active cooperation amongst commanders in dealing with widespread insurgency.

When the military squared off against the demonstrators, the results were not always favorable for the regime. There were instances of soldiers refusing to fire on their fellow Iranians, and some troops shot at those soldiers who did fire on civilians.<sup>23</sup> Desertions were also on the rise within the force, and this added to the sense of uncertainty. Finally, the Iranian military, with all its arms and equipment, was not organized, equipped or trained to fight internal insurgents and, more specifically, in situations that required less than deadly force. The Shah refused to allow the military to be prepared for these contingencies because he feared the military could be turned against him in a coup. Troops organized and equipped for urban fighting would be a potential threat to his throne. The external only orientation of the military meant the military was only prepared against a foreign enemy and left it "organized for the wrong war."<sup>24</sup>

Opposition leaders took full advantage of the split between the Shah's military supporters and the rank and file of the armed forces to further bring about a revolution in Iran. From France, the Ayatollah Khomeini stepped up his attacks against the Shah and concentrated heavily on the Shah-Imperial Army-United States connection. In September of 1978, Khomeini called for the armed forces to "throw off the yoke of slavery and humiliation," and denounced the Army as being, "in reality under American command, it is even led at the upper echelons by American advisors and technicians."<sup>25</sup>

Although he wished to drive a wedge between the people and the military, Khomeini was very careful not to paint the entire Iranian military as an inherently evil organization. In that same September speech he sought to divide the military against itself by saying, ". . . but there

have already been, among the officers and soldiers, evident signs of trouble as the popular revolt mounts."<sup>26</sup> Ultimately, Khomeini sought to decapitate the monarchist head of the military and control the body once in power.

Khomeini did this by attempting to divide the soldiers from their officers and the junior officers from the senior officers. He realized there was a split based on rank and social station in the Shah's force. He portrayed the upper echelons of the military as stooges of the Shah, irredeemably corrupt, anti-Islamic, and the tools of the Americans. In one speech Khomeini asked, "patriotic soldiers and Non-commissioned officers of our homeland to leave the forces of a despotic, bloodthirsty regime and place themselves on the side of the nation."<sup>27</sup>

Khomeini and his clerical supporters realized that the army was a key to the success of the Revolution. They needed to win the allegiance of as many soldiers as they could to render the military ineffective as a counter revolutionary tool. Radical clerics continued to call on the Army to reject the Shah's leadership by:

disobeying the orders of the black generals of the Shah's self-centered court and by joining the people. The soldiers, officers and armymen, are the children of the Iranian nation and cannot remain indifferent to the bloody events in the realm and the call--the invitation--of the national and religious leaders.<sup>28</sup>

Khomeini and his religious and secular allies continued to conspire to bring down the Shah. Their enemies were the monarchists that supported the Shah. Once they were removed, then the army could be maintained as an institution needed to consolidate the gains of the revolution.

Using many different centers of opposition organized around religion, the cleric class fomented the youth of Iran against the regime. One of these major influences was the Husayniyah Organization which was devoted to memory of martyred third Imam. Its major task was to introduce Islamic ideology to the youth of Iran. The Husayniyah harnessed the energy of

youth through a subtle campaigns with slogans such as, "Unveil the beautiful face of the beloved martyr of Islam in order to transform the love-seekers into restless lovers."<sup>29</sup> Mosques were also used as platforms for spreading the word. Religious schools in Teheran and especially the Holy city of Qom became hotbeds of revolutionary thought organized around Islamic themes.

One of the most crucial moves the clerics made was to forge an alliance between themselves and the bazaari, or merchant, class. The bazaaris felt displaced by new, Western connected merchants enriched by new contracts, and were ripe for the revolutionary picking. Traditionally, sons of the bazaaris were trained in clerical schools so there was a natural bridge between the two communities. This bridge was fully exploited by the revolutionary clerics.

The Shah's response to the revolutionaries was inconsistent and inadvertently boosted the morale of the revolutionaries. The Shah vacillated between cracking down on the opposition and seeking an accommodation with them. Unwillingly to commit the military to enforce his rule, he sought to accommodate the opposition. He fired the head of SAVAK, the dreaded security force, and said he had, "heard your revolutionary message." He promised to meet the demands of the opposition with the exception of him abdicating the throne. This shift in policy, which occurred in November of 1978, only emboldened the rebels who pressed harder for his removal from power.<sup>30</sup>

Despite the Shah's threat to use force, large crowds continued to demonstrate against the regime in December of 1978. Switching tactics again, the Shah tried to mollify the opposition by appointing Shahpur Bakhtiar, an outspoken critic and opposition party leader, to be the Prime Minister in January of 1979. Bakhtiar knew he would be walking a fine line by accepting an appointment from the Shah and only accepted the post on condition the Shah leave Iran. On 16 January 1979, the Shah and his family left Iran for what they thought would be a temporary

absence until the situation cooled. Bakhtiar promised to end martial law, abolish SAVAK, and reform the political system in Iran. Despite his efforts, he was branded by much of the opposition as a tool of the Shah, and his government became ineffective. Likewise, Bakhtiar did not command the loyalty of the Army either. Having been created by the Shah to support the Shah, the Army did not have the institutional allegiance to principles or a form of government. Once the Shah was gone so too was the loyalty of many of the senior military leaders to the successor government. Bakhtiar was caught in the middle and had little support from either side, especially of those who had guns.

On 1 February 1979, the Ayatollah Khomeini returned from exile in France to a tumultuous welcome. As a precursor of what would occur later, the Army was not entrusted with Khomeini's security at the airport. Instead, revolutionary guards stood watch over the Ayatollah's return. Khomeini did not assume an official position within the government, but used his tremendous influence as religious leader returning from exile to direct change in the government. He quickly took charge of a group called the Revolutionary Council: a group of sixteen to nineteen of the most trusted clerics in the country. The Council had veto power over government decisions. Later this body became more formalized and wielded considerable power.

Although fearing the Army, Khomeini wanted to preserve it for later use and did not advocate that it be disbanded. He encouraged his followers to avoid antagonizing the Army, urging the public to, "preserve public order and win the support of the armed forces."<sup>31</sup> In a direct appeal to the Army not to oppose the revolution Khomeini said;

I invite them for their own good and the nation's good to be with us. I hope they can be guided. The people are their brothers. We want what is good for them; we want them to be free and independent [of the Shah's influence].<sup>32</sup>

The Army was split with some advocating the Shah's return, others saying they would support the Constitution, and others siding with the more radical revolutionaries. Officially, the army pledged loyalty to the Constitution on 11 February, but that did not translate into direct support to Bahktiar.

Khomeini reached an informal agreement with the Army Chief of Staff to prevent the Army from becoming embroiled in violent suppression of the demonstrations.<sup>33</sup> This agreement was threatened when civilian technicians within the Air Force, known as Homafaran, staged a pro-Khomeini rally at Farahabad Air Base and were fired upon by members of the Imperial Guard. Unable to control the Army and with little public support, Bakhtiar was removed from government.

He was replaced by Mehdi Barzagan who attempted to pursue a moderate course. Barzagan emphasized the need to maintain ties to the West, which put him immediately at odds with the clerics on the Revolutionary Council who were virulently anti-Western. Barzagan's problems intensified when the Revolutionary Council established grass roots organizations to promote their vision of the Revolution. These "Komitehs" were popular in the poor urban areas and were a great source of mobilizing popular support for the clerics. An adjunct to these groups were the revolutionary tribunals set up to exact "justice" on the defeated regime. These summary courts targeted the security services, former government officials, and senior members of the Army for trial and, in many cases, executions.

Barzagan's troubles intensified when a student group loyal to Khomeini took United States Embassy personnel hostage in Teheran. When Khomeini refused to order the release of the hostages, the Barzagan government fell and paved the way for the takeover by the clerics on the Revolutionary Council. Khomeini used a combination of charismatic appeal, his standing as

a religious leader, and legal means to come to power. His Revolutionary Council selected a body of religious experts who drafted a new constitution. In December 1979, the day after Ashura, a referendum was held. Over ninety nine percent of the voters approved of the new Islamic Constitution but in reality, many Iranians opposed the move towards a growing theocracy.

Opposition parties boycotted the elections to the Majlis, or parliament, and the Islamic Republic Party (IRP) won the vast majority of seats. The referendum established three basic branches of government, plus a fourth which was called the Council of Guardians. This council had twelve members, six appointed by the Majlis and six by Khomeini himself. It had veto power over virtually all executive, legislative and judicial decisions. In effect, it ensured ideological control over the entire apparatus of government.

The Constitution established the Ayatollah Khomeini as the faqih, or Supreme Jurisprudent, with an unlimited term of office and the power to dismiss the President and appoint a Commander in Chief of the armed forces.<sup>34</sup> This was an unusual arrangement in Iranian history. Never before had a clerical leader taken up so much temporal power. Iranian Shiism had traditionally avoided direct participation in government as demeaning to spiritual authority. This arrangement was not only politically revolutionary, but a radical change within Shiism itself.<sup>35</sup>

In the chaos and confusion of the Shah's departure and Khomeini's return, many opposition forces tried to impose their will on the Iranian political system. The Mujahidin (Freedom Fighters) were a leftist group composed mostly of students and middle class intellectuals with a long history of opposition to the Shah. They quickly moved to seize arms from many of the disaffected soldiers and looted armories in Iran. Over 300,000 weapons were

taken by the various militias including pro-Khomeini groups, the Mujahidin and Fedayeen during the revolutionary period.<sup>36</sup>

The opposition groups regarded the Army as completely anti-revolutionary and unsalvageable as an institution. What they wanted was a people's militia that would represent all classes of Iranian society and would replace the Imperial Army. Conversely, Khomeini wished to retain the Army as an institution and reform it. At a minimum, the Army would have to undergo serious reform with the monarchist elements removed from its midst in order to make it responsive to the new regime. Despite the removal and execution of many senior leaders, there was always an element within the IRP that advocated the militia solution. No matter how much the Army was reformed, there would always be those hard-liners within the new revolutionary regime that would not trust the army to follow the orders of an Islamic government. Nevertheless, Khomeini began the reform of the Army into a more Islamic institution by removing the most obvious imperialist members of the armed forces. So began the purges of 1979.

### The First Purges

The Khomeini regime faced two competing desires upon coming to power. First, as the victors in the revolutionary struggle, there was a strong desire to seek revenge over the forces of the Shah with whom they had battled so long and to establish in all institutions an Islamic presence. The institutions that most supported the Shah, such as the security forces and the military were natural targets for extensive reorganization. Secondly, as leader of the nation, Khomeini also knew that he needed the military, as a coherent force to safeguard the country. Khomeini had successfully appealed to many service members not to oppose the people in the



revolutionary struggle. He needed the Army as an ally in the reshaping of Iran as an Islamic Republic.

What resulted were two distinct purges of the military. The first was from February to September 1979 and focused on removing the most overt supporters of the Shah. The second was from October 1979 to September 1980 and was more ideological in nature, with the goal of making the military more Islamic and responsive to the ruling IRP.

The first purge began with the execution of four generals on 15 February. Although the new regime stated as a goal, "the purging of the armed organizations affiliated with the former diabolical regime is among the top priorities of the new government," it did not want to completely destroy the military.<sup>37</sup> Khomeini continued to stress obedience and discipline among the armed forces and the civilian population as the new regime struggled to gain control of the structures of power.

The Islamic regime tried to stem the tide of chaos and anarchy that had swept the military. Troops were urged to report back to their units and follow the orders of their officers. New commanders who were acceptable to the revolutionary government were put in key positions and a new committee was formed to reorganize the general staff. Units were left intact with the exception of the Shah's palace guard, the Imperial Guard and the Immortals; which were disbanded.

What the regime feared as much as a counter revolutions was the factionalization of the Army along political lines. The Mojahedin was effective during the revolution in infiltrating the lower ranks of the Army and organizing Soldiers Councils as an alternative to the chain of command. The Fedayeen had also organized cells, mostly in the Homafaran. The pro-Communist Tudeh party advocated the return of Tudeh party officers who were in jail. Other

opposition leaders saw the success of the revolution as a chance to completely dismantle the Army and replace it with the populist militia concept. All of these were a threat to the military as it now existed and threaten to destabilize an already shaky organization. Khomeini knew he had to reinforce traditional military structure and discipline at the expense of revolutionary ideals to ensure there was no complete breakdown within the military.

The situation was similar to that in Russia following the 1917 Revolution. The Bolsheviks, having successfully organized many of the industrial workers and soldiers into councils, or Soviets, had to maintain control of them after the Czarist forces were defeated. They did this by maintaining Communist Party control over major organizations and eventually removing those revolutionary leaders who had ideological differences with the party leadership. The education and organizing the military along communist lines came after the political consolidation.

So too, in Iran the political leadership had to emphasize traditional organization and discipline to allow consolidation. At the end of February, Khomeini's responded to the demands from the left by saying,

the army, police and gendarmerie are now in the service of Islam and the nation. The nation should support them, and do nothing that might discourage them or hurt their feelings . . . . We respect you and regard you as our brothers. I emphatically warn the Iranian nation that the government must have a strong national army with a mighty morale, so that the government will have the power to safeguard the country . . . . Attacks on security forces' barracks throughout the country must be prevented. Today an attack on a barracks will be tantamount to opposing the Islamic revolution.<sup>38</sup>

Therefore the initial purge continued to focus on the monarchist leadership of the Imperial Army. Revolutionary justice was swift and often terminal. In the first two weeks of the purge seventy seven active military personnel were executed out of a total of 248. Most of the rest were SAVAK agents or other police.<sup>39</sup> Not all of those targeted for revolutionary justice

were executed. Many senior leaders were forced into early retirement. In the first week of the purge over fifty general officers were retired.<sup>40</sup>

The regime's increasing concern was the arbitrariness of the justice system. Most trials were held in secret by the Islamic Revolutionary committees. Trials were quick with the defendant not accorded the normal rights under either Iranian or Islamic law. Many were charged with civil crimes such as murder and torture but the most effective sweeping charges were "corruption on earth "and combating God, the apostle of God, and the imam of the era."<sup>41</sup>

On 16 March, in an effort to gain control of the process, Khomeini ordered that only the Islamic Revolutionary Council could convene a revolutionary trial. By May another twenty seven were executed with the total in October reaching 250.<sup>42</sup> Hundreds more were imprisoned or forced to resign. The bulk of the victims of the purge were members of Imperial Guards units or units that had a violent role in the suppression of the revolution. The purge was modified in July of 1979 with the announcement of a general amnesty for military personnel. The amnesty was an effort to bring some sense of normalcy amongst the armed forces who could not concentrate on reorganization and training with the constant threat of revolutionary justice hanging over them. The Islamic courts continued to hear crimes against those who actually murdered protesters or ordered executions or shootings, those who tortured prisoners and those who misappropriated public funds.<sup>43</sup>

The end of the first phase of the purge therefore did not have a great physical effect on the military. Most of those purged had close ties to the Shah or were units most aggressive in counter revolutionary activity. In fact, the primary target of the purge was SAVAK and the other security agencies so despised by the new regime. In this regard, Khomeini was pragmatic as far as the continuation of the Army as an institution within his new Islamic regime.

### The Second Purge

While Khomeini did not want the military destroyed, he did want it to be radically different than the Shah's Imperial Army. The second purge, October 1979- September 1980, was the regime's attempt to "Islamicize" the military so it could be counted on as a reliable instrument within the revolutionary government. The start of this second purge coincided with a political consolidation within the Islamic Republic Party. This indicated that the regime had consolidated power enough to form a coherent, national political body to promote its ideological cause. From this political base the regime created or reorganized other bureaucratic bodies to support and enforce its goals.

For the military this meant that the purges would no longer be conducted by the Islamic Revolutionary Committees, but by loyal revolutionary bodies within the military. The new Defense Minister, Dr. Mostafa Chamran, vigorously pursued this ideological line in continuing to purge the military. Chamran had originally supported the dissolution of the old Army and its replacement with the fledgling Revolutionary Guards (more about them later). Having been converted by Khomeini in his thinking that the Army was still needed to defend the country, Chamran still believed the Army to be corrupt and in need of wholesale reorganization.<sup>44</sup> He clearly stated the goals of the purge as being, based "on the criteria of belief in Iran's independence and territorial integrity, belief in the Islamic Revolution, its leader Khomeini and obedience to and acceptance of the governments sovereignty."<sup>45</sup> Within that quote we see at once the need for the army to defend the country in a conventional sense and the demand for revolutionary obedience to Khomeini within the *velayat e faqih* "government of the jurist" as the leader.

Chamran aimed at changing the very way soldiers identified themselves with the regime. He saw soldiers in the old Imperial Army as mindless automatons, blindly following orders of the Shah and his Western backers.<sup>46</sup> What was needed was for soldiers to identify themselves as Moslems first and thus introduce the human factor into the armed forces. The human factor represented at once both the dynamic energy of spiritualism that could be unleashed against an enemy when properly directed and the revolutionary concept of a mass militia in lieu of the elitist structure of the Shah's Army.

The main enemy of this conversion was the Western influence that had infected the old Army. Chamran clearly identified what he saw as the major threat when he said, "the most important issue which must be addressed . . . is the question of a purge in the army. As far as we are concerned the existing order is an order created and tailored by the Satanic regime."<sup>47</sup> This aspect of the purge was reinforced when a student group took the American Embassy hostages in November of 1979. A strain of anti-Western sentiment would remain in the new ideology of the armed forces. Those officers thought to have pro-Western bias were forced out or arrested.

Chamran's chief instrument in achieving this goal through the second purge was the newly established Political-Ideological Bureau, or PID. This organization was effective in identifying pro-Western officers and was also used to fight against "anti-Islamic" behavior such as gambling and drinking. By using organizations within the Army, the regime gradually institutionalized its ideology within the military. Most trials were conducted as courts martial and the results were not publicized. It is estimated that the second purge resulted in the removal of 6,000 personnel from the roles of the military by February 1980 and perhaps 10,000 by the start of the Iran-Iraq War in September 1980. This purge affected not only officers but also

NCOs. It is estimated that 4,000 field grade officers were purged, 2,500 company grade officers and 3,500 NCOs and warrant officers.<sup>48</sup> It is clear from these numbers that the goal of the second purge was to influence the rank and file of the military and transform the entire military into a more Islamic force.

Despite their best revolutionary efforts, the conservative elements of the military did not go quietly into the night. The April rescue attempt of the American hostages (Desert One) implicated certain members of the military, specifically in the Air Force. A special commission was appointed to investigate the lingering ties with the United States.<sup>49</sup> In June of 1980 there was a coup reported at the Piranshahr garrison by both active and retired officers which resulted in the arrest of some 175 soldiers. In July, President Bani Sadr reported that the new Revolutionary Guards had thwarted a military coup plot in Mehrabad who were planning to assassinate Khomeini. This led to the arrest of 450 officers and 44 executions, most in the Air Force.<sup>50</sup>

The impact of both purges was not so much physical as psychological. The officer corps of the Imperial army was over strength to begin with, by as much as 20 percent in the field grade ranks. The reduction in numbers was not an impediment towards combat readiness by itself. What was crucial in undermining readiness was the focus on ideological and political questions within the armed forces at the expense of reorganization, re-equipping and training. The Army needed to focus its efforts on becoming more professional, specifically developing effective command structures to conduct combined arms operations. Units needed to train and maintain their equipment, and discipline had to be reestablished. Opposition groups had taken over many of the arsenals and armories of the military, while the hostage crisis dried up the equipment pipeline. The Revolution had been so effective in neutralizing the military as a counter

revolutionary force, that the new regime had considerable trouble in reconstituting the discipline and organization once it took power.

The regime did take steps to ensure it had sweeping ideological control over the armed forces. The new regime used several organizational controls to ensure the regular Army became Islamicized, while at the same time formed its own force, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, or IRGC, as a politically reliable alternative to the Army. The new Islamic regime was similar to the Shah in its use of overlapping security organizations to ensure its will was carried out.

At the highest level the Supreme Defense Council, SDC, exercised political and religious control over all military units, whether regular Army or IRGC. The SDC had representatives at all echelons of command and their purpose was to ensure that the political and ideological loyalty of senior field commanders was unquestioned.<sup>51</sup> Most of these representatives were clerics of high rank, and they could veto field commanders decisions if they found them politically objectionable.

The most far reaching ideological control remained the PID. The PID answered to the joint staff of the SDC and in essence was a commissar system that reached down to the lowest level of every unit in the armed forces. Representatives could be clergy, IRP members, or clerics and they were present down to platoon level. They were responsible for ideological and political education of the soldiers, as well as propaganda and indoctrination of new troops. They could not overrule commanders, but did screen soldiers for advancement to the NCO ranks and could inform on those they considered anti-Islamic.<sup>52</sup>

Additionally, the joint staff had its own intelligence unit called the Guidance Office, (GO). The GO functioned as sort of an Islamic inspector general office, inspecting units to

discover unreliable officers and NCOs. Taken together, these organizations provided comprehensive ideological control over both the Army and IRGC, although the IRGC was largely self-motivating. The result was similar to what happened under the Shah. Commanders were under intense scrutiny for political reliability and their tactical decisions, although militarily sound, could be overruled for ideological reason.

### Conclusion

The result of the revolution was an ideology that stressed the human component over all else. This became the Islamic answer to the varied Western political ideologies. The Western models were rejected as foreign to the Iranian people, and Shiites in particular. This Islamic ideology fit conveniently into Iran's post revolutionary application to military affairs. The stress on the human factors could mitigate Iran's isolation from its previous military sponsor while providing a home grown solution to the question of what would succeed the Imperial Army.

Although Khomeini recognized the need for a professional, standing military, he wanted the essential character of that organization radically changed. The first purge aimed at only the most overt of the Shah's supporters using an external legal force. The second purge used the organizations within the military and indicated that the military would become Islamicized in order to become an acceptable institution within the new revolutionary regime. These purges came at a cost to the professionalism and readiness of the military, but a cost the regime was willing to pay.

The chaos and confusion of the Revolution, the various political factions within the military, and the reorganization of the armed forces along more revolutionary lines all came at the expense of training and combat readiness. Junior officers, who had long chafed under the control of the shah's politically appointed generals, quickly advanced up the ranks. However, the



lack of institutional professionalism degraded their ability to forge a more competent force. As the Iranian military felt its way along the thin path between ideological reorganization and maintenance of a credible force, its neighbor Iraq saw an opportunity to take advantage of the situation.

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<sup>1</sup> Nader Entessar, Post Revolutionary Iran: The Military and Politics in the Islamic Republic, (London: Westview Press, 1988), 56.

<sup>2</sup>George W. Gawrych, "Jihad in the Twentieth Century," Military Review, Sept-Oct 1995, 34.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>James A. Bill, "Morale Versus Technology; The Power of Iran in The Persian Gulf War," Iran-Iraq War, Edited by Farhang Rajaee, (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1993), 84.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Bill, 205.

<sup>7</sup>Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Ideals and Realities of Islam, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), 149.

<sup>8</sup>Hossein, 150.

<sup>9</sup>Bill, 205.

<sup>10</sup>Bill, 206.

<sup>11</sup>Dabashi, 15.

<sup>12</sup>Dabashi, 17.

<sup>13</sup>Dabashi, 19.

<sup>14</sup>John A. Berry, Jay C. Mumford, Roy E. Smith, "The Fall of the Shah, " Military Review (Ft Leavenworth, KS: November, 1979), 36.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 37.

<sup>16</sup>Mark J. Roberts, McNair Paper # 48, Institute for National Strategic Studies, 2.

- <sup>17</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>18</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>19</sup>Robin Wright, In The Name of God, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989) 51.
- <sup>20</sup>Ibid., 57-58.
- <sup>21</sup>Michael Fischer, Iran: From Religious Dispute to Revolution, p. 196.
- <sup>22</sup>Wright, 58-59.
- <sup>23</sup>Mark J. Roberts, Khomeini's Incorporation of the Iranian Military, (McNair Paper #48, 1996), 15.
- <sup>24</sup>Roberts, 15-16.
- <sup>25</sup>Roberts, 17.
- <sup>26</sup>Roberts, 10.
- <sup>27</sup>Roberts, 15.
- <sup>28</sup>"National Voice of Iran on Mutiny in Armed Forces," FBIS, 15 December 1978.
- <sup>29</sup>Dabashi, p. 19.
- <sup>30</sup>Berry et al, 38
- <sup>31</sup>Roberts, 6.
- <sup>32</sup>Roberts, 25.
- <sup>33</sup>Roberts, 26.
- <sup>34</sup>Wright, 74.
- <sup>35</sup>Wright, 24.
- <sup>36</sup>Teheran Journal, 26, February 1979, p. 1.
- <sup>37</sup>Gregory Rose, "Post Revolutionary Purge of Iran's Armed Forces: A Revisionist Assessment," Iranian Studies, volume XVII, Spring-Summer 1984, 154.
- <sup>38</sup>FBIS, Middle East and North Africa, 1 March 1979, R 2.

<sup>39</sup>Rose, 160.

<sup>40</sup>Roberts, 32-34.

<sup>41</sup>Roberts, p. 35.

<sup>42</sup>Nikola Scahgaldian, The Iranian Military Under the Islamic Republic, (New York: Rand, 1987), 19.

<sup>43</sup>Rose, 181.

<sup>44</sup>Nader, 63.

<sup>45</sup>Zabib, 122.

<sup>46</sup>Rose, 184.

<sup>47</sup>Schalgaldian, 22.

<sup>48</sup>Rose, 186.

<sup>49</sup>Rose, 186.

<sup>50</sup>Rose, 186.

<sup>51</sup>Schalgaldian, 30.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., 31.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE RISE OF ZEAL

The invasion of Iran by Iraq in 1980 was the most severe challenge to the fledgling Iranian revolutionary government. Barely 18 months old, the new regime was internationally isolated, suffering from intense internal violence and militarily weakened. The war took the country by surprise, and most outside observers gave the regime about three weeks before it collapsed. In these early days of the war, Iranian patriotism was perhaps the single greatest motivator of the nation, followed by revolutionary zeal. Outgunned and initially out-manned, the Iranian forces nevertheless managed to halt the Iraqi invaders and eventually expel them from Iran.

Despite suffering two purges, lack of equipment and spare parts, morale and discipline problems and many internal enemies, the Khomeini regime expected the Iranian regular forces were expected to defend the Iranian homeland. When the Iraqis were successful in their initial assaults, the regulars were blamed for not being motivated enough to repel them. This was proof to many who advocated an Islamic militia style force that the Shah's old Army could not be trusted with defense of the nation. Although the Army remained the key national defense force, the role of the newly formed Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) started to expand rapidly.

This expansion had severe repercussions for both the regular military and the overall war effort. First, it tainted the regular Army and the military traditions it stood for. When the purges

stripped away the monarchists and political enemies of the regime, they inadvertently caused chaos and ill discipline. Soldiers no longer trained and, in some cases, did not follow the orders of their officers. The Revolution called into question everything the military stood for. The new regime sought to reverse this by stressing discipline and ordering troops back to the barracks, but both the soldiers and society had lost much faith in the old system. An army in such disarray could hardly emphasize the fundamentals of sound training and tactics under such conditions.

Second, in the wake of vacuum created by the discrediting of the regular forces, the IRGC soon filled the void. Political reliability was more prized than military competence by the revolutionaries. The revolutionaries believed that just as the Revolution was needed to sweep away the remnants of a corrupt political order, so too could tradition battlefield organization and tactics be replaced with a new revolutionary army. Instead of the principles of war, the new force would profess the Koran, spirit of will and spontaneity.<sup>1</sup> Instead of traditional battalions and brigades, the new Islamic Army would be massed, reflecting the populist ideal espoused by the revolutionaries. Instead of integrating combined arms maneuver, the new force would revolutionize tactics that reflected their strength, namely an unshakable faith in their endeavor and the belief that God was on their side.

The dispute between those who saw the need to meet the Iraqi threat with a conventional force, organization and tactics with those who advocated a new, radical, revolutionary style force created a **disunity of command** that haunted the Iranian war effort. In time, there was a synthesis of these two competing ideals, but by then, the Iranian people were sick of the war and a political solution was necessary to save the revolution. It is the evolution of this synthesis that must be looked at in detail.

### The War Starts

In deciding to go to war Saddam Hussein of Iraq assumed the dominant Arab population in Khuzistan would rise in solidarity with his victorious soldiers. This assumption was based on the chaos in Iran following the Revolution. A civil war like atmosphere existed between the ruling clerics and the main opposition party, the Fedayeen-e-Khalq, and created conditions Saddam thought he could exploit. The general weakness of the Iranian military provided the opportunity for Saddam to force a military solution in redressing the balance of power in the region.

On 22 September, 1980 Saddam Hussein launched an invasion into Iran with seven divisions as part of a limited war to seize the oil-rich province of Khuzistan, gain better access to the Persian Gulf, limit the spread of Shia fundamentalism, and become the dominant Gulf power. The Iraqi military's objectives were the four main cities of Khorramshahr, Dezful, Abadan, and Ahvaz. Control of these cities would ensure Iraqi dominance of the northern Persian Gulf and deny the Iranians a major forward staging area from which to counterattack.<sup>2</sup> Although the main effort was across the Shatt al Arab into Khuzistan, Iraq also launched supporting efforts towards Mehran in the central sector and Qasr-e-Shirin in the north.

Mehran and Qasr-e-Shirin were quickly occupied by the advancing Iraqis. In the Khuzistan sector, the mechanized and armored troops of Iraq moved forward and took up positions around the key urban areas. In the south, the flat terrain across the Shatt al Arab was ideally suited for mobile warfare. Nevertheless Iraqi caution held the initial advance down to only 10 kilometers a day, despite the fact the Iranians had little to oppose the invaders. By 26 September, the Iraqis had advanced thirty five kilometers and laid siege to Abadan and Khorramshahr.

Initially, the only opposition to the Iraqi invasion were the Iranian border guards and one under-strength armored division around Ahvaz. Total personnel strength of the Iranian army was about 150,000; down from 285,000 during the last year of the Shah's rule.<sup>3</sup> The bulk of the Iranian army was deployed near the Soviet border or in Kurdistan. In addition to the previously mentioned morale and discipline problems, the regular Iranian army had serious maintenance and readiness difficulties. Units were understrength to the point where divisions were actually brigades and the operational readiness rates of the mechanized and armored units was as low as fifty percent in some units.<sup>4</sup> Only half the fighter aircraft were serviceable due in large part to the severing of the American connection and the unavailability of spare parts.

Despite initial Iraqi success early in the war, the Iranians proved to be stubborn fighters and soon slowed the Iraqi advances. The Khuzistan Arabs did not rise up to support the Iraqis, but remained loyal to Iran. Saddam Hussein was concerned with high casualties, not because of his concern for his troops, but because his forces were made up of nearly fifty percent Shiite Iraqis, and he did not want to undermine his political position at home if troop losses were too high. As a result, he did not push his troops to seize key urban areas in the early stages of the war when the Iranians were most vulnerable. Iraq did not seek to extend the conflict deep into Iran although such a course of action could have brought the regular Iranian forces to battle and perhaps defeat early in the war. As a result, the heaviest fighting was in and around the larger urban areas the Iraqis had quickly enveloped.

Once inside the cities, the Iraqi advantage of armor and fire support gave way to the light infantryman. The city was defended by both regular troops and the Iranian regime's new revolutionary army called the Revolutionary Guards, or Pasdaran, who dug in and withstood intense indirect fire. The Pasdaran troops, comprising the bulk of the defenders and fighting

with only light arms and homemade bombs, extracted heavy casualties upon the Iraqis.

Although estimates vary, it is assumed that the Iraqis lost between 1,500 and 3,500 total casualties in this battle with Iranian casualties even higher.<sup>5</sup>

Regular troops in Khorramshahr were comprised mostly of an elite ranger unit formed during the days of the Shah. In some reports the rangers fought well, while in others there were charges that the Pasdaran had to force the Army to fight by positioning its troops behind the regulars and threatening to shoot them.<sup>6</sup> Despite the heroic efforts of the various Iranian units, the Iraqis captured Khorramshahr on 25 October. Fighting for this city was so bloody that it was eventually renamed Khunnishar, or City of Blood.

For the Iraqis the battle for Khorramshahr signaled the end of the aggressive portion of the limited war they had embarked upon the month before. Saddam would not allow any more large-scale, infantry intensive, attacks, especially in urban areas. For the Iraqi military leadership this meant they could not capture the besieged cities of Dezful or Abadan, key terrain in their original war objectives. Saddam offered a five day cease fire to begin on 1 October in order to consolidate his gains, an offer the Iranians flatly rejected.

For the Iranians, the Khorramshahr battle signaled the further subordination of the regular forces to the IRGC. The Ayatollah Montazeri, a leading cleric, spoke on the problem of inter service coordination with an eye towards blaming the regulars. He said,

the responsible authorities and commanders cannot make firm decisions. Or is it that-God Forbid- this is deliberate? All these issues need to be investigated. The army commander should, in accordance with the Imam's command, act with greater decisiveness and should break the encirclement of Khunnishar and Abadan and with lightening assault should rid the people of Khuzistan and Kordestan of the evil of the infidel Baath agents. But if they are weak and incapable, then they should say so candidly so that the Imam himself would directly make decisions.<sup>7</sup>



Khomeini formed the Strategic Defense Council (SDC) in October to coordinate the Iranian war effort. The seven member council was nominally headed by President Bani Sadr, but was in effect dominated by revolutionary clerics who distrusted him.<sup>8</sup> The SDC allowed for better overall direction in mobilizing the Iranian war effort, but clearly showed the division between those who wished the Army to conduct the war, such as Bani Sadr, and the hard-line mullahs who wished to use revolutionary methods. The SDC became the political battleground between those two forces.

The clerics pointed to the Pasdaran performance at Khorramshahr as evidence of the need for a revolutionary army. As champion of the regulars, Bani Sadr explained the Army's absence in the first month of the war as a premeditated decision taken to give the army time to recover from the latest purges.<sup>9</sup> This clear blow at the clerical elites did not sit well with the leading Ayatollahs who said that this explanation was proof that only the Pasdaran could be counted on to fight for Iran and Islam. The conflict on the SDC between Bani Sadr and the clerics would only end with Bani Sadr's dismissal from office. But it would not end the debate between the Army and the Pasdaran.

Regardless, the initial Iranian reaction to the Iraqi invasion reflected the disunity of effort that would plague the Iranians throughout the war. Army and Pasdaran efforts were not coordinated and all units were clearly not trained and ready to defend the nation. Virtually all Iranians agreed that the war would be a national (if not religious) effort with all efforts mobilized to expel the invader. Said Khomeini at a Friday prayer, "This war is not going to end soon."<sup>10</sup> Iran would count on two crucial factors to wage this war; a large population from which to draw soldiers and a revolutionary spirit in which to fire them.

For the next three months, the regular and Pasdaran forces managed to stabilize the front lines. Iraq still controlled Khorramshahr and most of the Shatt al Arab waterway, while the Iraqi Army besieged the key port city of Abadan from two sides. But Saddam was clearly uninterested and incapable of conquering even these limited objectives. Saddam now intended to hold on to the Iranian territory captured to date and wait for a political solution. In January of 1981, with Iraqi forces in check, revolutionary elements within the government demanded that the armed forces launch a counter offensive to expel all Iraqis from Iran. Again, the Ayatollah Montazeri spoke on behalf of the hard-liners in saying, "[servicemen were complaining] that their leaders would not allow them to advance against the Iraqis."<sup>11</sup> At the recommendation of senior Army commanders, President Bani Sadr counseled that the armed forces were not yet ready for such an operation. Bani Sadr already distrusted Khomeini and the clerics and was suspicious even in the early days of the war of the ultimate motives of the ruling clerics. In September of 1980 he stated,

Khomeini wants to use it (the war) to set up repression and prevent the people from concentrating their attention on the course of the revolution, and also as a means to dupe the people, because war enables the solution of domestic problems to be postponed indefinitely.<sup>12</sup>

Overruled, Bani Sadr was forced to plan and execute a counter offensive. Iran committed elements of several armored divisions totaling about 300 tanks, mostly British Chieftains and American M 60s, in an attempt to outflank the Iraqis in the vicinity of Susangird. The Pasdaran also committed infantry forces in this attack. The goal was to break the Iraqi defenses in the town then drive towards Ahvaz and then Abadan.

Iranian operations security was very poor and the obvious troop concentrations were observed by the Iraqis who correctly anticipated the direction of attack. The actions of the Iranian regulars and Pasdaran forces were completely uncoordinated. Iraq maintained air

superiority and hit the advancing Iranians upon their approach to Susangird. The Iraqi defenses in the center of the line gave way, encouraging the Iranians into thinking they were on the verge of a breakthrough. As the Iranian tanks continued to advance unsupported by aircraft or detailed fire support, they were struck on both flanks by Iraqi armor, artillery and air support. As a result, the Iranians suffered heavy losses of about 100 tanks destroyed and, more ominously, 150 captured. Iraqi losses were estimated at about fifty T-62 tanks.<sup>13</sup>

Clearly, something had gone wrong with the attack, but the Iranians refused to acknowledge it. Iran claimed to have achieved victory, saying it had destroyed two Iraqi brigades taking 2,000 prisoners in the process.<sup>14</sup> Neutral observers discounted these claims as fantasy. The Iranian regime tried to compensate for the battlefield setback by claiming its real objective was to “weaken” the Iraqis, not recapture the key cities. Internally, the political fallout further exacerbated the Army-Pasdaran split.

In the closing stages of the Susangird battle, many of the surviving Iranian armored forces had retreated hastily, leaving the Pasdaran infantry fully exposed and unsupported against the Iraqi counter-attack. Many in the Pasdaran thought this was done deliberately, and at the funeral for one hundred Revolutionary Guards the mullah giving the memorial stated, “When the order for retreat is issued why are our beloved not told and as a result encircled and massacred? I warn those responsible, there must be an investigation of this for maybe there are treacherous hands at work.”<sup>15</sup>

Although there was no evidence that the Army purposely sought the destruction of the Pasdaran, the loss at Susangird was placed squarely on the shoulders of Bani Sadr and the Army. The clerics on the SDC used the loss to start shifting resources away from the Army and towards

the IRGC. A new military force was soon introduced that reflected the long held beliefs of the clerics that the military should be organized on a popular and Islamic basis.

Toward that end the Basij-i-Moztaafin, or “Army of the Oppressed,” was introduced as the populist arm of the IRGC. The Basij was established as a militia force, initially mostly teenagers from religious families, recruited from predominantly rural areas with its members serving three month tours as infantrymen. Over three million males and one million female auxiliaries were recruited during the war. Training was very simple and emphasized ideological loyalty to the Imam Khomeini, not military professionalism.<sup>16</sup> The introduction of the Basij marked a turning point in the rise of the forces of ideology over those of military professionalism as Iran would seek to couple its population advantage with the dynamic energy of its revolution to win the war.

The mobilization of the Basij accomplished two things for the Iranians. First, it brought to bear the population advantage the Iranians had over the Iraqis. If Iran were to win an extended war with Iraq it would have to use its larger population to its advantage. Second, the Basij was the regimes answer to those who thought the concept of a professional army was alien to the goals of the Islamic Revolution and instead advocated an Islamic militia as an alternative. The subordination of the Basij to the Pasdaran ensured these troops would be used in new and revolutionary ways. In the Basij, the Pasdaran would have a huge military manpower reserve in which to conduct offensive operations. These operations would be conducted according to the ideological dictates of the IRGC, not the traditional methods of the regular Army.

On 21 May 1981, Iran launched what it called a spring offensive. Code named “Operation *Allaho Akbar*,” it was really an attempt to win a public relations victory and was a small scale operation. Combined Army and Pasdaran units attacked and captured the heights

over looking Susangird, destroyed an Iraqi battalion, then halted operations.<sup>17</sup> The significance of the operation was not the ground seized, but that the regulars and Pasdaran actually conducted a coordinated attack. Unfortunately for the Iranians, lessons of this battle were not institutionalized. There would be other examples of this type of cooperation on the battlefield, but never for a sustained period. Thus a blueprint existed for successful joint operations between the regulars and the Pasdaran, but mistrust and wide tactical differences always prevented the kind of comprehensive coordination needed to fight and win on the modern battlefield.

The rest of the spring and summer of 1981 saw little large scale fighting as Iran shifted troops from the quiet Soviet border, Baluchistan and Kurdistan towards the Khuzistan and Susangird fronts in preparation of an autumn offensive. The Iraqis were content to hold the ground already captured. In June, Bani Sadr finally lost the power struggle with the hard-liners. First he was stripped of his title as Commander and Chief of the Army on 10 June. Then on 21 June the Majlis voted him politically incompetent and ordered his arrest. He quickly fled the country and was replaced by an fundamentalist dominated government led by Speaker Ali Akbar Hasemi Rafsanjani and Supreme Court Justice Mohammed Beheshti.<sup>18</sup> Politically, the stage was set for the continued advancement of the Pasdaran at the expense of the Army.

On 27 September the Iranians hurled a large force of Pasdaran to break the siege of Abadan. This was a battle of morale with the demoralized Iraqis sitting glumly in their defensive works while the zealous Pasdaran repeatedly attacked them in great waves. Iranian troops were determined to evict the Iraqis from their homeland, but the ferocity of the Pasdaran attack was due to the religious zeal instilled in the soldiers. The Pasdaran succeeded in breaking the siege and in the process killed over 1,000 Iraqis and captured nearly 2,000. This first major Iranian victory was much heralded in Iran and Majlis speaker Rafsanjani could not help direct a barb at

the Army in saying, “This victory could have come sooner, but Bani Sadr hindered it, for he was relying on pernicious elements in the Army.”<sup>19</sup> The Pasdaran star was rising while the Army remained in disfavor.

The success of the Pasdaran at Abadan encouraged the Iranians into thinking that massed assaults would be an effective tactic if applied on an even larger scale. They reasoned that morale, essentially the human factor of war, was in their favor. They were fighting a Jihad against a secular invader who had already shown signs of demoralization. How then could their holy army not prevail? As a result the Iranians decided to employ units of the Basij for the first time on a large scale. Short on training and weapons, these young men were high on spirit and loyalty, to the point of fanaticism.

As part of a larger offensive called *Tariq al-Qods* or “Path to Jerusalem,” an attack was launched against the city of Bostan near the border on the Susangird front. The Pasdaran was given responsibility to plan and execute this attack. Army suggestions to use coordinate artillery fire for the infantry were rejected.<sup>20</sup> Instead the plan called for the use of the revolutionary tactics that relied on religious fervor to win. In this Pasdaran directed operation, the Basij were to attack in daylight across a series of minefields to clear a path for the Pasdaran to follow. Wearing red and yellow headbands and keys around their necks to gain access to heaven after being martyred, thousands of Basij walked through the mines, losing hundreds as casualties.<sup>21</sup> Those that cleared the minefields breached wire obstacles by hand, often throwing themselves on top of the wire to allow their comrades to cross over.

The Pasdaran followed the Basij as the main effort attacking in waves of dismounted infantry. The Army, meanwhile, conducted a heliborne insertion dropping an infantry battalion three miles behind the town. This maneuver caused great confusion among the defenders.<sup>22</sup>

The frontal attacks continued until the Iraqi defenders were overwhelmed and defeated. The overwhelming emotion and fanaticism of the Pasdaran and the Basij had a darker side. Many of the over 1,000 Iraqi prisoners taken were forced at gun point to walk through the same minefields that so many Basij had died in clearing the way for the Pasdaran.<sup>23</sup>

The Iranians continued to use these human wave assaults, many conducted at night and met with some success. Pasdaran units started employing infiltration tactics to penetrate Iraqi defenses during darkness to enable the follow on Basij assaults to succeed. The Iraqis were unnerved by the sight and sound of so many dedicated troops rushing towards them, oblivious to casualties. This short campaign ended with the onset of winter. The Iranians viewed the Bostan victory as a triumph of new Pasdaran tactics rather than the well coordinated use of regular and Pasdaran forces. The Pasdaran use of the elan tactics which emphasized the spirit of the attack and celebrated the triumph of the individual over the technological were hailed as the keys to the victory. Khomeini congratulated both the Army and Pasdaran but quickly reassigned the Army's 21st Infantry Division commander to a remote post to remove him from a position of influence, thus confirming the ascendancy of the Pasdaran.

Both sides rested for the remainder of the winter of 1981 with the Iranians continuing to recruit large numbers of troops in preparation for a spring offensive to expel the Iraqis from Iran. Code named "Operation Fath al-Mobeen" or "Undeniable Victory," the Iranians employed 40,000 Pasdaran, 30,000 Basij and 30,000 Army troops in a general offensive aimed initially at liberating Khuzistan. Again the IRGC had the lead in directing this operation, the largest of its kind to date for the Iranians. The Army played a subordinate role in this offensive.

The Pasdaran again stressed surprise, shock infantry and persistence as the themes of the offensive. Capitalizing on the general demoralization of the Iraqis, the Iranians quickly gained

the upper hand throughout the spring of 1982. The operation began on 22 March 1982 and was characterized by sustained Iranian attacks. Most assaults were conducted at night or just before daybreak with Basij or Pasdaran “forerunners” clearing a path for the main body of assault infantry.<sup>24</sup> Many of these assaults caught the Iraqis by surprise and many positions were captured intact. The spring rains and muddy conditions negated the armor advantage the Iraqis had but the general demoralization of the Iraqi forces coupled with the fervor of the Iranians was the biggest factor in the battle’s outcome.

After seven days of sustained fighting the Iranians had nearly decimated the Iraqi 4th Army as three of its divisions were badly mauled. The Iraqis suffered 5,000 dead with over 15,000 captured. Seven hundred armored vehicles were destroyed or captured.<sup>25</sup> Iranian losses were estimated at about 3,000 total casualties. More importantly over 1,800 square miles of Khuzistan, was liberated. Both the Army and Pasdaran enjoyed success on the battlefield, but the level of cooperation was low with each force essentially conducting its own operations. Although some lip service was paid to official Army-Pasdaran cooperation, beneath the surface there were deep tensions. In a Armed Forces Day address Khomeini spoke of the continuing discord, “Victory may only be achieved with unity. This unity must be safeguarded at all times. If there are elements sowing discord among the military personnel, the commanders must be notified at once.”<sup>26</sup>

The Iranian offensive continued. In April, the Iranians were on the outskirts of Khorramshahr and moved their artillery forward within range of Basra. The Iraqis responded by withdrawing troops from around Ahvaz and Susangird to protect their flanks. By May, the Iranians had reclaimed 8,500 square miles of territory and captured another 10,000 prisoners. The climax was the recapture of Khorramshahr, the city that had been so desperately contested



for almost two years. Surrounding the city, over 65,000 Iranian troops encircled and defeated two Iraqi divisions and forced another to withdraw. With his Army collapsing, Saddam Hussein asked for peace talks with the Iranians. When his offer was immediately rejected, he then ordered a general retreat of his forces back towards the original border in the hopes that the war could end, although Iraq did retain some territory in Iran. Having achieved a great victory, the Iranians had other ideas.

The victory at Khorramshahr and the capture of Khuzistan brought about several dramatic events in Iran that indicated the forces of revolutionary ideology were dominant. First, the SDC announced that Iran's war aims were to invade Iraq with the goal of removing Saddam Hussein and the Baathists from power, forcing the Iraqis to admit war guilt, collecting war reparations in the amount of \$150 billion, and repatriating Iranian Shiites forced into exile by Iraq.<sup>27</sup> This dramatic shift in goals was a reflection of just how much power the hard-liners in the government and the SDC had gained. Saddam could not accept to these terms as they would effectively terminate both the Baath Party and himself. Iraq would have to fight a defensive war for the foreseeable future to fend off the now ideologically driven Iranians approaching their border.

Secondly, in military terms, the success of the spring offensive validated the IRGC forces and their tactics. The leaders of the Pasdaran and Basij thought their victories over the Iranians proved that their method of warfare represented a military breakthrough of historic proportions. Commenting on the independent nature of the Pasdaran one IRGC general stated, "The party of God does not accept advisors. We are going to write our own military manuals from now on with absolutely new tactics that Americans, British and French can study at their staff colleges."<sup>28</sup>

This attitude represents at once the dominance of revolutionary ideology in military affairs, the belief that these innovations represented a breakthrough in military tactics and a rejection of Western dominated military thought that was prevalent in the Shah's Imperial Army.

Within Iran, the hard-line clerics sought to establish a stranglehold over domestic politics and institute the ideals of the revolution that the start of the war had postponed. During the spring offensive, Iran cracked down on continuing opposition at home. A plot by former foreign minister Sadeq Qotbzadeh to overthrow the government was announced. Senior leaders within the Army were implicated as was a leading grand Ayatollah. Another purge of the army resulted with seventy officers executed by September 1982. The clerical regime used the coup threat to wipe out the remnants of the Mojahedin and other armed opposition.

By the end of 1982 the ruling clerics were in a strong enough position to consolidate a theocracy in Iran. Schools, government workers, trade association and other institutions became Islamicized with local "Komitehs" ensuring that the sharia, or religious law, was vigorously enforced. The Majlis also passed a law that spring that granted exemptions to young Iranians from the draft if they enlisted in the Pasdaran. In addition to the prestige of belonging to the Pasdaran, the volunteers also received material advantage. Pay in the Pasdaran was higher than in the Army, and the soldier's family received extra ration coupons.<sup>29</sup>

Having withstood the initial Iraqi attack, Iran and its ruling clerics consolidated power and institutionalized their revolution. Khomeini himself made the connection between the expanding revolutionary goals and the military when he said, "We shall export our revolution to whole world. Until the cry there is no god but God resounds over the whole world, there will be struggle."<sup>30</sup> Khomeini and the clerics justified the expansion of the war by saying that the evil of the Baathist regime remained and had to be purified. Quoting from the Koran, Khomeini said, "Fight them until the evil is uprooted and the enemy becomes a pure believer in God."<sup>31</sup>

### Into Iraq

The Iranians planned a new offensive code named "Ramadan" which for the first time aimed at the capture Iraqi territory, specifically, Iraq's second largest city, Basra. Home to many Iraqi Shiites, Basra was located close to the border and was difficult to defend due to the lack of strategic depth. The marshes, however, provided a natural defensive barrier. The loss of Basra would be a huge blow to the Sunni-dominated Baathist regime, especially if the Iranians established an Islamic government there.

On 13 July 1982, the Iranian assault was launched across the Iran-Iraq border. Again the IRGC forces led the assault, with the Basij volunteers of the 7th Division spearheading the attack. Attacking at dusk, the Basij followed the pattern of earlier operations charging in massed formations to create a breach in the Iraqi obstacle belts. Following them were the Pasdaran, and then the regular Army with the total number of Iranian troops at about 90,000.<sup>32</sup>

The initial assaults appeared to be successful with the Iraqi 9th Division pulling back under heavy pressure. The 9th then halted its pull back and dug in and held its new position. The Iraqis then counter attacked the exposed flanks of the Iranian salient with their mobile forces and artillery. In the brutal heat of the summer, the Iranians continued to attack, but advanced only about ten miles into Iraq. Suffering heavy casualties in the searing heat and continually attacked on its flanks, the Iranians finally broke off the attack. Iraq's casualties were also heavy with the 9th division suffering over thirty percent losses.<sup>33</sup>

Just as the Iraqis had badly miscalculated the Iranian response at the war's start, now it was the Iranians turn to underestimate their enemy. Fighting for their own territory for the first time, the Iraqis showed resolve in the defense. The Iranian assumption that the Shiites of southern Iraq would revolt proved as false as the Iraqi assumption that Persian Arabs would rise

in 1980. Militarily, the Iraqis had learned important lessons from Abadan, Susangird and Bostan. They started to integrate engineer effort, indirect fire, and mobile reserves into their defensive plans. Since they had the firepower advantage, this strategy would prove effective against Iranian revolutionary tactics.

The Iraqis recognized they were in a fight for survival and took the necessary steps to meet the threat. They doubled the size of the Army from 200,000 in 1980 to around 475,000 by 1983 and reorganized the leadership, firing many of the Baath sponsored political appointees and replacing them with more qualified military professionals. They also erected a series of fortifications and resupply roads around key cities along the path of the Iranian invasion. The Iraqis were now deployed in three corps from north to south. In the north the 4th Corps was composed of two divisions. Guarding Baghdad in the center was 2nd Corps with three divisions, while the eight division 3rd corps defended in the south in the contested Basra sector. An addition Corps, made up of reservists, constituted the strategic reserve.

The Iranians continued their summer offensive through August of 1982, directing their attacks at Basra. From the start of the *Ramadan* offensive in mid July to early August the Iranians launched no fewer than five major assaults using over 100,000 men organized into four regular Army divisions and six IRGC units.<sup>34</sup> The Pasdaran tactics were the same but the Iraqis were not. Using their fortifications to maximum effect coupled with poison gas seen for the first time, the Iraqis repulsed each attack with heavy losses on both sides. Having withstood the initial shock of the massed wave assaults, the Iraqis were now punishing the Iranian assault troops whose attacks were becoming too predictable. The shock of the Pasdaran tactics had worn off and the Iraqis were using the predictability of the Iranian tactics to their advantage.

The Army, meanwhile, was still relegated to a supporting effort. The failure of the attacks into Iraq intensified the debate over war aims in general and tactics specifically. The Army was never in favor of a general attack into Iraq and it was skeptical of the Pasdaran elan tactics, which they considered unsophisticated, frontal assaults. The ruling clerics saw this as evidence that the Army still could not be fully trusted as a revolutionary, Islamic institution within Iran. As a result, the IRGC and its revolutionary tactics remained in favor, despite questionable battlefield performance. Instead of innovation, initiative, and combined arms operations, IRGC directed attacks became as predictable as an eastern sunrise. The Iraqis were becoming familiar with the elan tactics and took measures to stop them, such as concentrating firepower in likely assembly areas to disrupt the attack. Many of the zealous, dedicated volunteers recruited in the early part of the war were now wasted on attacks doomed to failure.

The ground war settled into a deadly routine for the rest of 1982 and the early part of 1983. IRGC directed attacks led by Basij and Pasdaran forces attempted to batter their way through well dug in Iraqi defenses. Two autumn attacks, this time directed at Baghdad, failed to make any appreciable headway. Again, Iranian casualties were large. The Army played a supporting role in these attacks, watching helplessly as the cream of Iranian youth was misspent in questionable assaults. The lack of armor and fire support was a critical omission to the Pasdaran battle plans. Lack of spare parts and replacement systems played a large role, but the Army retained enough tanks and artillery pieces to make a difference had they been integrated into the Pasdaran attacks.

The Iranians were performing akin to the Great Powers in World War I. They were committing huge quantities of troops in costly frontal assaults without result. The Iranian use of infiltration tactics remained a sound option, but was overused. Like the "Hutier" tactics of the

WWI Germans, these shock infantry tactics caused great initial disruption among the enemy by using highly trained, dismounted infantry to create a small penetration in an established defense. The failure of Hutier tactics was the inability to follow the initial assaults with exploitation forces. Whereas the Germans were limited by technology (no radios, tanks, mechanized infantry) the Iranians had the means at their disposal to follow up on the initial assault. The victory at Bostan should have pointed the way for the Iranians. Human wave assaults, when used in conjunction with other combined arms, could succeed. By relying on them exclusively, the Iranians became slaves to a form of warfare based too much on ideological concerns and not enough on battlefield realities. The huge losses of 1982 did not change the Pasharan way of thinking as the year ended.

Iran scaled back the scope of its attacks in mid 1983 but wished to retain the initiative. Several smaller scale attacks took place, this time under with the Army having more influence in the planning and execution. In a change of strategy, the Army sought to take advantage of Iran's superior numbers and stretch the Iraqis along the entire 730 mile front by conducting limited attacks in different locations. The hope was to force the Iraqis to continually commit their smaller reserves to a number of threatened areas and wear them down strategically. The results of this war of attrition were mixed.

In the south, attacks directed at cutting the Basra road to Baghdad failed, mostly due to a reliance on frontal assaults and the strength of the Iraqi defense. In the center and north the Iranians did achieve some moderate success. The last remaining major city still occupied by the Iraqis, Mehran, was finally liberated by the Army. Taking advantage of Kurdish resistance to Iraq, the Army also had some success in the north, capturing key terrain in the mountains without suffering the horrendous losses that characterized IRGC operations.

Like the Pasdaran, the Army had its share of problems as well. It was not conducting combined arms operations well and its logistics system was weak and prone to breakdown. The Iranian logistics system was so poor that it could not sustain any offensive operation more than a few weeks. The widespread lack of spare parts and new equipment also hurt the Army efforts. Internally, the Army was still trying to develop itself professionally, survive in a political system that favored their rival forces in the IRGC, and overcome the legacy of the Shah's Imperial Army. In essence, the Army knew what "right" looked like, but needed time, resources and training to achieve it. With a war raging, these commodities were not available to them.

A larger problem with the Army strategy as far, as the ruling elites were concerned, was that it did not envision a large scale final battle. Such a battle had great historic appeal to the ruling clerics who continually cited "Karbala" as the model they wished to emulate. The Army strategy would wear the Iraqis down over time and probably force a political solution. This did not meet the ideological goal of crushing the evil Baathist regime and the accompanying "final battle" where good would triumph over evil. The Army had its chance to show what conventional tactics could do and enjoyed some modest success. For the clerics however, this method of waging war was unacceptable. It would take too long and reflected stale military thought, not the revolutionary approach they thought would gain a decisive, glorious victory.

The year 1984 found the IRGC in a difficult position. They disapproved of the Army's war of proportional attrition yet knew that any further frontal assaults on Basra would probably not succeed. What they opted for was a return to the infiltration tactics that were partially successful at the beginning of the war, this time using them as a deception. The Pasdaran planned to take Basra by infiltrating the marshes to the north of the city using hundreds of small

boats to gain positional advantage over the Iraqis. This attack would then be followed by a massive assault by Pasdaran and Basij forces to cut the Basra to Baghdad highway.

Code named *Kheiber* the first attacks were launched on 22 February 1984 through the marshes. Again the Pasdaran enjoyed initial success but soon suffered heavily as the Iraqi mobile reserve brought heavy firepower to bear on the attackers. Again, there was no follow up to the marsh attack. Instead the Iranians sent over 500,000 men attacking along a broad front from Mehran to Basra. From 24 February to 19 March the Iranians hurled themselves at the Iraqis. At tremendous cost in men, the Iranians advanced to within fifteen miles of the strategic highway and captured the oilfields in Majnoon, south of Basra. They also evicted the Iraqis from the last remnants of land they once occupied. Iran was completely liberated, but the war showed no signs of ending and the cost was horrendous. Iranian casualties from the *Kheiber* offensive was over 26,000 dead, mostly from the Pasdaran and Basij.<sup>35</sup> That represents half the total American dead from the entire Vietnam War.

These developments did not seem to change the minds of the political leadership on the conduct of the war. Following the *Kheiber* offensive, Khomeini continued to emphasize the ideological nature of the struggle. He stated, "Few historical examples exist of a military which is fighting not only for national goals but also divine objectives."<sup>36</sup> Despite the dogmatic nature of the political goal there was change underway within the military forces. Having failed to win on the battlefield by purely revolutionary means, the IRGC forces started to move towards organizing, equipping and training their forces along more conventional lines. The goal of the complete defeat of Iraq remained unchanged at the strategic level. The *Kheiber* losses had finally convinced many in the Pasdaran that a new way must be found to implement that goal at



the operational and tactical levels. The evolution of the IRGC in that regard requires further analysis.

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<sup>1</sup>Stephen C. Pelletiere and Douglas Johnson, "Lessons Learned: The Iran Iraq War," 2.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 7.

<sup>3</sup>Efraim Karsh, Iran-Iraq War: A Military Analysis, Adelphi Papers, ISS, Spring, 1987, 14.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Pelletiere, 9.

<sup>6</sup>Susan Merdinger, "The Race for Martyrdom," (Monterey, CA: Naval Post Graduate School, 1982), 94.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 94.

<sup>8</sup>William Stauffenmaier, "Military and Political Strategy in the Gulf War," *Parameters*, (June 82), 28.

<sup>9</sup>E. Rouleau, *Le Monde*, 11 October 1980, FBIS 15 October 1980, 50.

<sup>10</sup>Merdinger, 92.

<sup>11</sup>Merdinger, 98.

<sup>12</sup>Zahrai, 237.

<sup>13</sup>Karsh, 22.

<sup>14</sup>New York Times, 8 January 1981, 8.

<sup>15</sup>Merdinger, 100.

<sup>16</sup>Nader, 67.

<sup>17</sup>Merdinger, 104.

<sup>18</sup>Robin Wright, In the Name of God, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 97.

<sup>19</sup>Washington Post, 29 September 1981, A 12.

- <sup>20</sup>Wright, 101.
- <sup>21</sup>Wright, 102.
- <sup>22</sup>Sephr Zabib, Iran Since the Revolution, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1982), 216.
- <sup>23</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>24</sup>Merdinger, 106.
- <sup>25</sup>Zabih, 220-221.
- <sup>26</sup>New York Times, 19 April 1982, 2.
- <sup>27</sup>Mark A. Heller, "The War Strategy of Iran," Middle East Review, Summer 1987, 18.
- <sup>28</sup>Wright, 104.
- <sup>29</sup>Zabih, 223.
- <sup>30</sup>Wright, 108.
- <sup>31</sup>Stephen Zabib, The Iranian Military in Revolution and War, 1988, 151.
- <sup>32</sup>Merdinger, 108.
- <sup>33</sup>Pelletiere, 12.
- <sup>34</sup>Karsh, 27.
- <sup>35</sup>Zabib, 02.
- <sup>36</sup>Anthony Cordesman & Abraham Wagner, The Lessons of Modern War volume II, (San Francisco, CA: Westview, 1990), 147.

## CHAPTER 5

### THE IRGC

No organization in Iran represented the struggle between military professionalism and the pursuit of ideology better than the Revolutionary Guards. Officially established in May of 1979, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps progressed from an armed militia to the predominant service within the Iranian armed forces with both a battlefield mission and responsibility for safeguarding the Revolution itself.

The use of specialized troops is not new in the history of warfare. Many regimes have felt the need to use armed units that were not only militarily proficient, but also politically reliable. Revolutionary regimes in particular have needed these units because their political goals are often at odds with the conservative nature of the military establishments in their states. An example is the Bolsheviks following the October Revolution. Facing the hostile remains of an inherently conservative Czarist Army, the Bolsheviks countered this by organizing new military units called Guards units. These units were politically reliable and led by those the regime could trust.

One of the most comprehensive uses of specialized troops was the German use of the Guard Detachment (Schutzstaffel), or SS, in World War II. The SS were formed initially as a body guard unit for Adolph Hitler. They pledged personal loyalty to him and his cause. During the time of the chaotic Weimar Republic, Hitler's political party, the National Socialist German Workers Party (NSDAP), was one of many right wing groups that advocated a return to German

greatness through both national and socialist means. The theme of many of these groups was that the German upper classes were as responsible for Germany's defeat in WWI. Many groups also blamed Communists and Jews for the loss in the war and the depression in the 1920s. They wished to remake German society, elevating the worker to a higher position, but in a nationalist setting. This so called "Brown Revolution," was named after the Sturmabteilung or SA, known as the Brownshirts. As the NSDAP gained strength, Hitler realized that he could not completely control the armed forces of the SA, who had waged vicious street battles with their communist rivals. Hitler's answer to the SA was the SS. They combined the ideological foundation of the right wing movement with a personal loyalty to Hitler himself. In the SS Hitler found his most dependable ideological pillar surpassing that of the NSDAP itself.

Once the SA had outlived its usefulness, Hitler had it eliminated in a bloody purge called "The Night of the Long Knives." Growing in size and complexity, the SS became the RSHA (Reichssicherhauptamt), or Reich Main Security Department. The RSHA included the secret police (Gestapo), the armed (Waffen) SS who fought on the battlefield, the Reich Foreign Security Department (SD), and a whole host of other agencies dealing in everything from logistics, to training, to weapons development and procurement.

As World War II progressed the Waffen SS fielded combat units of up to corps size. Initially, membership was voluntary in this elite organization. Members had to trace their genealogical lineage back to the eighteenth century as proof of their racial purity, and training was rigorous and included a heavy emphasis on Nazi ideology. SS units were well trained and equipped for combat, and fought with a fanatical zeal both in the attack and defense. They believed in the racial warfare theories of the Nazi party and often committed gross atrocities. The RSHA considered all missions assigned to the SS as critical. A concentration camp guard's

duties carried as much importance to the RSHA as a combat soldier in the Waffen SS. There was no distinction in rank, pay or benefits between the two. For the RSHA fighting a conventional war and brutally exterminating entire races of people were both critical missions as dictated by Hitler.

The Iranian use of the IRGC has many basic similarities as well as some key differences with the German example. First, the IRGC and the RSHA both had internal security missions as well as combat responsibilities. The IRGC first saw action against Kurdish insurgents and was used extensively against the Mojahedin e Khalq during the vicious street fighting after the Revolution. The RSHA controlled organizations responsible for security within the Reich and in occupied countries.

Second, both organizations grew in size and scope and eventually included weapons procurement, research and development, and its own logistics and economic programs. The SS had its own economics organization that used the captured resources of occupied nations, slave labor and capital investment to raise money for its organization. Similarly, the IRGC became involved in economic activities to raise funds; although without the atrocities associated with the RSHA.

Third, both the IRGC and RSHA fielded specialized combat troops in war. Manning in both the Pasdaran and Waffen SS was initially based on recruiting volunteers who were motivated ideologically to serve in those forces. The continuation of war forced both forces to adopt conscription to fill their ranks. For the SS, the year 1943 meant the end of recruiting volunteers while the Pasdaran resorted to conscription in 1987. Both the Pasdaran and the Waffen SS were equipped with the best the nation could offer, and both forces brought their ideology to war with them.

Fourth, both organizations stressed loyalty to their leaders. The Waffen SS took an oath of loyalty to Hitler himself and emphasized their connection to him personally. This was enshrined in a tenet called the "fuhrerprinzip" or leader principle. The Pasdaran believed in the velayat e faqih of Khomeini and stressed their loyalty to him.

There are some key differences, however. The IRGC never believed or engaged in genocide. The revolutionary regime in Iran never had as its goal the destruction of the Iraqi people. Khomeini continued to stress that Iran's enemy was Saddam Hussein and his Baathist regime, not the Iraqi nation. He wished to convert them and bring them back to what he considered the true state of Islam; not eliminate them as race.

The basis of Nazi ideology, as applied by Hitler, was the destiny of the Germanic people to rule the world based on the concept of racial superiority. Combining racial theories with social Darwinism, the Nazis condemned entire races of people to death based on this twisted criteria. The RSHA, and in particular the SS, were the central implementing agencies for this policy that became known as the Final Solution (Holocaust). The RSHA formulated the racial guidelines, ran the security services that enforced them, and utilized the SS in the concentration camps that executed the Final Solution.

Another key difference was the velayat-e faqih itself. Although there was a strong current of loyalty between the Pasdaran and Khomeini, it has a cultural and religious root. The leading clerics of Iran have always had a special role in Iranian society, based on their demonstrated piety and religious learning. An Iranian politician could not command that strong a sense of loyalty culturally, as Hitler did, because there is no way he could gain the religious legitimacy needed to win over the population.

Hitler, on the other hand, constructed the fuhrereprinzip based on myth and folklore of the Middle Ages. He envisioned himself as the natural leader of the Tuetonic races, who by virtue of their race were destined to dominate the people of Europe. He was the "Volks Tribune," or people's spokesman, who would lead modern Germany to racial greatness based on the myths of medieval Germany.

Despite their differences, the Pasdaran and Waffen SS both shared a devotion to ideology that often superseded military professionalism. The Waffen SS meticulously carried the so-called "Commissar Law" whereby Hitler ordered every political officer in the Soviet Army to be executed on site. Liberally interpreted, the order resulted in the deaths of thousands of Soviet government officials. The result was a hardening of the will of every local , regional and national government institutions in the Soviet Union. SS battlefield atrocities committed on the Western front at Malmedy and Oradour were considered routine by the SS, but had a tremendous effect on Allied troops whose will was stiffened when they learned of these crimes.

The Pasdaran problem was not one of atrocities, but of the continued use of tactics that proved ineffective and a waste of manpower. The human wave assaults proved effective in limited instances, but became a standard ideological tactic used by the Pasdaran (specifically their Basij militia). Over time they lost their effectiveness on the battlefield, yet were retained as proof of the Pasdaran devotion to martyrdom. In both cases the adherence to ideological principles came at the expense of professional military duties.

Both organizations attempted to incorporate aspects of professionalism with the SS being the more professional from the standpoint of battlefield proficiency. As the war progressed, SS units were often used as the fire brigades of the Army, rushed to the sector most threatened with a breakthrough.<sup>1</sup> The Pasdaran, on the other hand, struggled with the issue of

professionalism, only grudgingly accepting it over time. Eventually the Pasdaran incorporated armor, engineer and artillery training into their military training, but did not use them effectively in combat.

Despite these attempts both specialized units remained rivals to the regular forces within their nations. The Wehrmacht saw the SS as upstarts with no legitimacy on the battlefield. The Iranian Army saw the Pasdaran in a similar light. Disagreements on manning, equipment and tactics were common to both forces, with the specialized troops having national priority over the regulars.

The key difference was the command structure. The German Army retained tactical control over the SS at the Corps or Army level. There were SS Divisions and Corps, but at some higher level, the Wehrmacht exercised tactical control, thus the Germans maintained unity of effort. The result was that Waffen SS units made tactical contributions to the German war effort. The IRGC and its components remained independent of Army control in Iran. Despite some notable examples of cooperation between the Army and the IRGC, the two forces never fully cooperated or coordinated efforts on the battlefield.<sup>2</sup> The duality of command had a significant negative effect on the Iranian war effort, specifically hampering its efforts to take advantage of its one strategic advantage, its population. In a war that lasted as long as this one, the Iranians should have been victorious in a war of attrition with the less populated Iraqis. The human wave assaults were wasted not because of the huge casualties, but because they were not tied to larger scale operations to take advantage of them.

#### Evolution of the IRGC

The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps was formed in 1977 as the Mojahedin of the Islamic Revolution (MIR), a coalition of seven militia groups numbering around 4,000 and



trained by the Palestinian Liberation Army (PLO) outside Iran. Its goal was the overthrow of the Shah and it emphasized loyalty to the Ayatollah Khomeini as a basic tenet. Following the revolution, the new Islamic constitution enshrined the Guard's position in Iranian society. Article 144 of the Constitution called for the armed forces of Iran to be Islamic by eradicating the Imperial military while retaining discipline and the normal chain of command.

This would be accomplished by two means. The first was to Islamicize the regular Army by removing monarchist and other disruptive elements (the purges) and by implementing new ideological controls throughout the ranks to ensure loyalty to the new regime. The second was the introduction of a new, ideologically reliable force that would embody the ideal of the Islamic soldier; the Revolutionary Guards (IRGC).

Article 150 specifically created the IRGC and called upon it to, "defend the revolution and safeguard its achievements." The same article assigned the IRGC military duties, "determined by law in conjunction with the duties of other military forces of the nation and with regard to the principle of brotherly cooperation and coordination among all military forces."<sup>3</sup> Thus the IRGC had a clear ideological mandate and an important, but vaguer, military component. The regular Army still retained the primary role of defending the nation while the constitution optimistically called for cooperation between the regulars and the IRGC. The Guard's ideological role was clearer and the threat to the Revolution very real in the early days after Khomeini came to power.

The specific role assigned to the IRGC following the Revolution was to enforce Islamic law in the urban areas along with the Komitehs, confront counter revolutionary forces in armed action, protect government buildings, execute intelligence gathering, recruiting and propaganda

operations and assist other Islamic revolutionary movements worldwide.<sup>4</sup> Clearly, the IRGC was responsible for political, ideological and security missions.

To allow the Guard to accomplish these varied missions, it was set up independent of regular Army control. The Army was still not trusted as an Islamic institution, although it retained its historic mission as the guardian of the nation's borders. The establishment of an independent IRGC satisfied several demanding political issues. First, it created a mechanism to create a people's militia, which was a common theme amongst revolutionary forces in the regime. Within the IRGC, the Basij, came closest to representing this militia force. Second, the IRGC provided an armed force that was ideologically loyal to the ruling clerics in general, and the Ayatollah Khomeini in particular. It was used to suppress demonstrations, enforce the religious laws of the regime, and monitor opponents of the Islamic republic. Third, the IRGC was the institution most capable of exporting the Iranian Revolution to other Muslim states. In the early 1980s the Guard sent cadres to Lebanon to establish a presence among the Shiites there. In short, the IRGC represented the armed, ideological pillar of revolutionary Iran; one that could be counted on to perform military actions at the direction of Khomeini and the ruling clerics.

The size and influence of the IRGC grew quickly following the Revolution. In December of 1979 the IRGC strength was 10,000. By June of 1980 it grew to over 25,000 and quickly doubled to 50,000 after the war began. By 1985 the IRGC stood at 250,000 and the following year it surpassed the army in total strength with over 350,000 active members.<sup>5</sup>

For the first nine years of its existence, the IRGC accepted only volunteers into its ranks. The average Pasdar, or guard, was between eighteen and twenty six years old, unmarried, poor and from the Persian majority. Many were unemployed and looking for solutions to Iran's pressing social and political issues.<sup>6</sup> Many were attracted to the Islamic messages and wished to

prove their mettle by joining a military organization that was at once revolutionary and Islamic. To ensure political loyalty the IRGC did not accept (with few exceptions) officers who had served in the Shah's Army. Most officers were chosen for their political loyalty to the IRP or their role in the revolution. This selection process assured loyalty, but also meant that the IRGC lacked the professional base needed to run a military organization.

The militia component of the IRGC was the Sepah-e Basij, or Mobilization Army. Formed as a bulwark against an expected American invasion following the seizure of the hostages in 1979, the Basij was incorporated into the IRGC in 1980 and at its height in 1985 had a strength level of 600,000. The average Basij soldier was between twenty and thirty years old. Most Basij recruits were rural poor and were uneducated. They were recruited by their local Komitehs and served for limited terms usually three months. The December to March time frame was the most popular for service so men could return home in time for the planting season. As a result, many of the IRGC led offensives were tied to this mobilization schedule.

Training in both the Pasdaran and Basij units was as much ideological as it was military. Basij weapons training was limited to small arms and grenades and many Basij went into battle unarmed. Much of their training was geared towards motivating the volunteers to perform acts of heroism rather than perform as a professional military unit. Pasdaran basic training was three months long and was heavy on the teachings of Khomeini and other clerics at the expense of military studies.<sup>7</sup>

In 1982, the IRGC set up its own high schools to educate students. The curriculum included military and ideological courses. Graduates would leave the school and join Basij units from their home towns or be selected to attend Pasdaran training and then assignment in a Pasdaran unit.<sup>8</sup> In this way the IRGC exerted more complete control over the youth of Iran and

could really focus its ideological message on the most impressionable of Iran's future soldiers. This education process continued at the college level. The IRGC set up advanced schools in engineering, military studies and ideology. In 1987, the IRGC set up its own military academy called the Imam Hussein University, where both military and religious subjects were equally taught.<sup>9</sup> At all levels the IRGC stressed the ideological (religious ) nature of the struggle with Iraq and produced graduates who were loyal to Khomeini and believers in his revolutionary cause.

The IRGC maintained its connection to the regime in two ways. First, the IRGC worked at the political level through the IRGC Ministry, which coordinated between the IRGC and the government. This Ministry maintained political surveillance on the IRGC and also coordinated logistics support at the national level. The second means was through IRGC Central Committee, which was the main administrative body of the organization. The Central committee was organized into eleven regional commands which gives the IRGC national coverage. Ideological control was maintained by having clerical representation on the Central committee, appointed by Khomeini himself. This representative had the power to veto decisions, even tactical ones, of the Central Committee. Religious ideology was reinforced by clerics who were attached at all levels from the regional sub commands down to the unit level in the Pasdaran units. They had their own chain of command and could alter military plans according to ideological needs<sup>10</sup> This system was similar to the commissars employed by the Red Army to maintain Communist Party control over the Soviet military.

Within military affairs the IRGC answered to the SDC and consulted with the other services through the joint staff. However, the IRGC was considered the senior service and cooperation at the senior level was made difficult by the IRGC's ideological outlook. An

example was the Army's desire to wage a war of attrition at the strategic level by conducting operational maneuver warfare to force the Iraqis to spread their forces thin, then overwhelm them at their weakest point. The IRGC insisted on frontal assaults towards well defended Basra so an Islamic republic could be set up there following occupation.

The Army-IRGC rivalry was evident at the policy making level as well. In 1985, the other services were forbidden to accept recruits until all Pasdaran units were fully manned. In that same year Khomeini authorized the IRGC to form its own naval and air force contingents. It was these IRGC naval units that mined the Straits of Hormuz and attacked tankers causing the United States to reflag Kuwaiti ships.

The focus of the IRGC was the human element. This is a reflection of the regime's ideology which stresses the spirit of the individual over technology. Ideologically, the individual represents the Islamic way to victory while the enemies of Islam use technology as a crutch because of a lack of faith. When combined with the concept of martyrdom, the stress on the individual becomes more evident. Soldiers willing to give their lives for a just cause represent what is best in Shiism. At the tactical level this translated into the use of elan tactics, such as infiltration and human wave assaults. IRGC commander Moshen Rezai admitted as much when he said in 1986, "We do not need advanced planes and tanks for victory. Employment of infantry forces with light weapons, four times the number of Iraqi troops will be enough for Iran to overcome the enemy."<sup>11</sup>

These tactics were not necessarily the incorrect application of force, given the organization and background of the IRGC. The existence of martyrdom and jihad in Shiite culture offered an opportunity for the IRGC to exploit the zeal of its young soldiers and still achieve battlefield success. The problem was the insistence of the IRGC in using these tactics

almost exclusively; and at the expense of other methods. In battles where regular forces such as armor and heliborne infantry were employed, the Pasdaran and Basij attacks could bring good results. The combination of infiltrating Iraqi positions, then following it up with some form of maneuver and a Basij mass assault would probably have achieved sustained battlefield success. Instead, the IRGC continued to use elan tactics in isolation. This doomed the IRGC war effort to heavy losses with limited or negative results on the battlefield. The continued use of these tactics represented a victory of ideology over professionalism.

The leaders of the IRGC recognized that at some point they were sacrificing professionalism for their ideological beliefs. This was generally accepted as the necessary price to pay to preserve the purity of their struggle. Majlis Speaker Rafsanjani acknowledged that the Guards formalized training system was, "less a vehicle for determining military proficiency than for perpetuating the Guard's revolutionary militancy and its institutional independence from the more experienced regular armed forces."<sup>12</sup> This reinforced the primacy of ideology over professionalism and confirmed the continuing suspicions of the regular armed forces.

### Conclusion

The evolution of the Guard from an armed political group to a military organization that superseded the Army took place over several years. By 1986, the Guard came to look and act more like the professional military which it considered its rival for so long. It developed its own military academies and training centers to educate its own officers in the art, science, and ideology of war. The Guard also evolved from a pure light infantry force in the early part of the war to combined arms units with armor and artillery and eventually possessed its own naval and air force contingents. At the end of the war, the Guards forces were larger than the regular

Army, and had their own independent recruiting, logistics, weapons development and training systems.

Despite this move towards professionalism, the IRGC retained its basic ideological orientation. The expansion into the combined arms arena did not translate into a change in tactics, nor more importantly, a serious change in its relations with the regular Army. The IRGC continued to count on the ideological fervor of its recruits to win on the battlefield. Later in the war, recruiting became more difficult. When the IRGC had to resort to conscription, it had lost its ideological momentum. Conscript could in no way replace the eager volunteers in the early part of the war in carrying out the elan IRGC tactics.

Throughout the war the IRGC remained a key component of the Islamic regime. Its influence was felt everywhere within Iran. It established and maintained close ideological ties to the regime through a variety of command and clerical channels. The failure of IRGC elan tactics reflected a larger failure of Iran to win at the strategic level using ideology. Its revolution was unwanted by other Moslem states in the region, who helped isolate Iran internationally. Just as Iran's expression of radical Shiism failed to win on the strategic level, so too did the militant fervor and elan tactics expressed by the IRGC fail to win on the operational and tactical levels. Without the incorporation of professionalism, ideological methods alone were insufficient to achieve victory.

General war weariness in Iran was growing by 1985 and was evident everywhere by 1987. Eventually, the clerics had to recognize that no matter what tactics they employed, they could not conquer Iran and preserve their own Revolution. In 1988, the war finally ended with a political solution that set the border at the same point as when the war began. Saddam Hussein remained in power and Iran's Islamic Revolution remained confined within its own borders. The

Iranian Revolution survived as did the Revolutionary Guards, who now resembled a more professional armed force than when the war began.

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<sup>1</sup>Bruce Quarrie, Hitler's Teutonic Knights, (Wellingborough, UK: 1986), 27.

<sup>2</sup>Sharam Chubin, "Iran and the War: from Stalemate to Cease-fire," The Iran-Iraq War, Edited by Efraim Karsh, (New York: St Martin's Press, 1989), 243.

<sup>3</sup>Entessar Nader, Post Revolutionary Iran, (London: Westview Press, 1988), 65-66.

<sup>4</sup>Schalgaladian, 74-75.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 68-69.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 83-84.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 31.

<sup>8</sup>Kenneth Katzman, Warriors of Islam: Iran's Revolutionary Guard, (San Francisco, CA: Westview 1993), 91-93.

<sup>9</sup>Nader, 66.

<sup>10</sup>James Dingeman Richard Jupa, "Iranian Elite: The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps," 75.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 6.

<sup>12</sup>Katzman, 91-93.



## CHAPTER 6

### THE FALL OF ZEAL

The decline in revolutionary fervor in Iran occurred over time and at all three levels of war. At the strategic level general war weariness was creeping in by 1985. The economy was in shambles with inflation running at up to twenty percent and decreasing revenue from oil production.<sup>1</sup> The revelation of the arms for hostages deal with America left many Iranians puzzled and disillusioned over the regimes dealings with a country continuously derided as the "Great Satan" By 1987, the regime was having trouble finding enough volunteers to fill the ranks and desertions, draft dodging became a major problem and even the IRGC had to resort to conscription. The dissolution of the IRP in June of 1987 reflected Khomeini's desire to silence growing criticism of the war effort.

At the tactical level, Pasdaran units reached their zenith in 1986, with the attack on the Faw Peninsula. After the massive losses in the 1987 Karbala offensives, the IRGC lost much of its zeal as its battle-hardened veterans perished. The replacements were not motivated to the same degree and did not have the combat experience needed to compensate for the lack of zeal. In the Iraqi offensives in 1988, Pasdaran units broke and ran for the first time in the war, clearly indicating this was no longer the ideologically bulwark of the regime. In this same offensive, huge numbers of Iranian prisoners were taken by the Iraqis.

Operationally, not much changed, as the IRGC and Army continued on separate paths. The ruling clerics still did not trust the Army fully and counted on the IRGC to achieve its

military goals. They maintained that the revolutionary tactics used by the IRGC, linked to the faith of the people, would ensure victory. Despite some tactical success in 1985 and 1986 in the IRGC led offensives, this was not translated into any overall campaign success because of the lack of operational planning and execution.

### IRGC Offensives

The year 1985 saw a continuation of the IRGC-Army split over objectives, but a coming together on tactics. The Army advocated the complete commitment of regular and Pasdaran forces to a maneuver war with the purpose of encircling isolated Iraqi units and defeating them. This would mean coordinated attacks in areas away from the heaviest Iraqi defense, such as the Basra area. The IRGC continued to insist on direct assaults that would isolate Basra, but was willing to forego the costly human wave assaults to achieve its objective. Before the Iranians could organize a spring offensive, however, the Iraqis launched an attack of their own. On 28 January 1985, Iraq attacked to demonstrate to Iran that they would not remain on the defensive forever, and that they possessed the capability to take the initiative. The attack was aimed at the capture of the town of Qasr-e-Shirin, but achieved very little.

On 11 March the Iranians began Operation *Badr* sending over 100,000 men in the attack north of Basra, attempting to cut it off from Baghdad. The plan was for IRGC forces, organized into six infantry divisions and eleven infantry brigades, to cross the marshy area in the vicinity of the old border and cut the Tigris highway between Basra and Baghdad.<sup>2</sup> The Army contributed six infantry brigades to the operation, but played only a supporting role. Pasdaran forces led the assault and achieved some success, even managing to temporarily cut the highway. The tactics used were more conventional than earlier Pasdaran assaults, reflecting a more professional approach. Pasdaran infantry sought and exploited weak points in the enemy lines, instead of on

continuous frontal assaults. However, the attack was made almost exclusively by infantry and did not have the needed firepower or mobility to take advantage of the initial success.

The Iraqis had learned some lessons which they now applied in the battle. Mobile armored formations quickly reacted to the breakthrough and counterattacked. Using combined arms and chemical weapons, the Iraqis managed to throw the Iranians back with both sides suffering heavy casualties. Iraqi losses were around 11,000 while the Iranians suffered some 15,000 casualties.<sup>3</sup> Even though the Iraqis were successful in stalemating the Iranians, the *Badr* offensive caused severe alarm in Baghdad. The Iranians were able to inflict nearly the same level of casualties and gain ground in their initial assault. If such attacks continued, the Iraqis would be under intense pressure. Saddam Huessein's answer was to try to widen the war by missile attacks on Iranian cities and launching air strikes against the oil terminal at Kharg Island to cripple the only source of hard currency for the Iranians. Iran tried to respond in kind but had limited deep strike assets to employ. Instead, the Iranians regrouped and prepared to launch a major ground offensive in 1986.

By 1986, the Pasdaran forces of the IRGC had gained considerable combat experience and had learned painful battlefield lessons that improved the quality of their force. Virtually all of these lessons were at the tactical level and were confined to a single branch, infantry. Pasdaran units were expert in the use of small arms, mortars, machine guns and overland and riverine infiltration tactics. Unfortunately, they still had not learned the lessons of operation maneuver that were critical in winning through massive offensives. In other words, the Pasdaran had become expert in the "elan" tactics at the small unit level (battalion and below) but still lacked the ability to execute combined arms attacks at the operational level.

Despite their shortcomings, the IRGC was put in charge of the 1986 offensive code named *Dawn VIII*. The goal of this operation was to penetrate into Iraq using a supporting attack towards Basra as a diversion, while sending the main effort south towards the Faw Peninsula. Faw had once been a main oil terminal for Iraq but now sat abandoned, guarded only by some reserve troops. Its value to Iran was that, if captured, it provided a direct route north to Basra.

The Iranians attacked with six Pasdaran infantry divisions, five separate brigades and Basij support while the Army provided four infantry regiments to support the deception at Basra. Having deceived the Iraqis into believing Basra was the target of the main effort, the Iranians hurled over 100,000 Pasdaran and 50,000 Basij at al Faw. Using the skills learned in the marshes the years before and rehearsed in the lake regions of north Iran, Pasdaran surprised the Iraqi defenders. Under cover of bad weather and darkness, Pasdaran crossed the Shatt al Arab on February 10 and captured the main town of Faw. The winter weather favored the infantry-heavy IRC forces who quickly dug in. Heavy rains bogged down the Iraqi Republican Guard units sent to dislodge the now entrenched Iranians. For once, the Pasdaran artillery was effective and quickly turned back the first Iraqi relief force.<sup>4</sup>

The Iranians now tried to exploit their success by attacking on 13 February straight west towards the only remaining Iraqi port, Umm Qasr. This attack failed as the Pasdaran did not have the mobility to exploit the success at Faw. A preplanned deliberate assault was one thing; to exploit that success took mobile formations and a competent logistics system, something the IRGC lacked.

Although boxed in on the Faw peninsula, the Iranians had caused near panic in Baghdad and the rest of the Gulf states. If the Iranians could take Umm Qasr, they would be on the border with Kuwait and the balance of power in the region would be in jeopardy. To prevent this from

happening, Saddam ordered Faw be retaken, and quickly. Iraqi armored forces tried to retake the area, but were repulsed for three weeks. The extreme wetness of the region prevented the Iraqis from effectively using their superior armor advantage. The IRGC infantry was extremely tenacious in the defensive using dug in infantry position every 300 meters with antitank weapons to stop the Iraqi tanks. Iran attempted to push out from its foothold in Operation *Karbala II*, but could not muster the needed firepower to blast past the Iraqis. Still in possession of 360 square miles of Iraqi territory, Iran was content for now to maintain a foothold in Iraq, in what was now a battle of wills. Iran was now confident it could deal a decisive blow to the Iraqis.

Iraq responded by launching an attack that captured the town of Mehran in the central sector. Saddam offered to exchange Mehran for the Faw Peninsula, but his offer was rejected by the Iranians. The Iraqis could not adequately defend the Mehran region from counterattack without committing units from the strategic reserve and were thus vulnerable in the town itself. The Iranians launched a counteroffensive on 10 June, code named *Karbala I*, and retook Mehran from the Iraqis. Predictably, the Iraqis answered by trying to widen the war again. They reignited the oil tanker war and missile attacks on the cities throughout the rest of the summer.

The result of the spring 1986 campaign was an intense period of mobilization for both sides. The Iraqis were compelled to end the deferment of students from conscription. This was skillfully accomplished by encouraging students to join the prestigious Republican Guards units as an alternative to conscription into a regular unit. The Iranians sensed that Iraq had reached the limit of its manpower reserves and will to fight and felt that one more decisive blow would bring complete victory in a war that, so far, had claimed almost 120,000 Iraqi lives and almost 250,000 Iranians in six years.<sup>5</sup>

The clerics announced that the war be decisively won by 21 January 1987, the Iranian New Year. Toward that end they mobilized an additional 300,000 volunteers to fight what they called the last campaign.<sup>6</sup> IRGC commander Mushin Rezai announced the call up in these terms, "so far in the imposed war only two per cent of the country's popular forces and twelve percent of its economic forces have been utilized . . . . We are on the threshold of a full-scale people's war, and this the only path."<sup>7</sup>

To achieve this objective, the Iranians had to launch a winter offensive in 1986. On 24 December, the Iranians began the *Karbala IV* offensive with the goal of crossing the Shatt al Arab north of Faw, cutting the road behind the main Iraqi defense, and eventually reaching Basra. The attack was to begin with the seizure of the island of Umm Rassas in the Shatt (ten miles south of Basra) then use it as a jumping off point for subsequent attacks.<sup>8</sup> Again the IRGC spearheaded this attack with nearly 200,000 Pasdaran and Basij troops. One division was to seize Umm Rassas, while three others crossed the river nearby and attacked the Iraqi defenses. Unlike the Faw attack, this time the Iraqis were prepared. Intelligence provided by the United States had forewarned of a large troop build up in the area. The Iraqis blasted the attacking Iranians with coordinated direct and indirect fire from well prepared positions. After two days of heavy fighting, the Iranians withdrew having suffered 8,000 casualties versus 3,000 for Iraq.<sup>9</sup>

The Iranians rationalized the failure of *Karbala IV* as merely a diversionary attack, but since there was no other attack during that time, this was clearly untrue. Instead, the Iranians regrouped and launched *Karbala V* about a week later, still believing that one final battle would settle the war. The Iranians hurled eleven divisions of IRGC troops across the Shatt al Arab towards Basra in an attempt of isolate that city. They quickly crossed the Shatt and occupied the

town of Shalamche, but were held up by a series of water barriers constructed by the Iraqis between the river and Basra.

Using these barriers as obstacles, the Iraqis poured deadly fire into the attacking Iranians, who were still fighting without Army armor and artillery support. Despite the early gains by some well trained Pasdaran units, the Iranian attacks soon ran out of momentum. The Iraqis counterattacked, but soon were slowed by the Pasdaran infantry, who by now had achieved a high degree of proficiency in defending in broken terrain. After a week of fighting, the Iranians captured only twenty six square miles of Iraqi territory between the Shatt al Arab and the water barriers. The main Iraqi defensive lines remained intact.

Unwilling to give up the initiative, the Iranians immediately transitioned to the next Karbala offensive. *Karbala VI* was launched on 13 January 1987 in the central sector around Qasr-e-Shirin to relieve pressure on the Basra front. The regular forces organized this attack, which succeeded in capturing about 100 square miles of Iraqi territory. Why this attack was not more closely coordinated with the main effort at Basra indicates that the dual command structure of the Iranian war effort was not working. Had the Army been used to reinforce IRGC success or as a diversion prior to *Karbala IV* to draw off Iraqi reserves, the outcome may have been different. As it was, Karbala V and VI did not support each at the critical point during the advance of the Pasdaran troops and only served to relieve some pressure on the IRGC around Basra after the assault had lost momentum.

Iran did continue the assaults in the south, still under the *Karbala V* code name, but the window of opportunity no longer existed. Iraq strengthened this critical sector and was able to mass enough fire support to prevent the Iranians from breaking through. The Iranians did,

however, push within seven miles of Basra before they were stopped. The Iraqis committed almost the last of their Republican Guards to stem the tide.

Again, the Army played no role in *Karbala V* and was not even present in this sector of the battlefield. The Iranians continued to divide the war fronts, giving the most critical sectors around Basra to the IRGC, while the Army was assigned secondary areas. Valuable armor and artillery support was thus not available to the IRGC at this critical moment. On 26 February, the Iranians called off the *Karbala V* offensive. Pasdaran losses were about 20,000 in *Karbala V* with many units taking up to 25 percent losses, while the Basij lost another 50,000 casualties.<sup>10</sup> Iraqi casualties were about 25,000 total. In addition to losing large quantities of troops, the Iranians lost much of the quality of the Pasdaran troops it had taken years to build up. The loss of the most zealous and battle hardened junior officers and NCOs severely hurt the IRGC. These men could not be replaced easily, especially by a nation struggling to provide needed personnel replacements. The Khomeini regime was starting to feel the strain of waging modern war over an extended period of time.

Just a week prior to the end of *Karbala V*, Khomeini prepared the Iranian people for the battlefield defeat by saying that "the waging of war needed to be seen as a divine cause rather than a single final offensive."<sup>11</sup> The Iranian people started to see the war as a hopeless quagmire where their leaders promised victory after each battle but still had to conduct one more "final" offensive. Significantly, in April of 1987, Tehran had its first major anti-war demonstration.

By this time in the war, even the hard core elements in the IRP were divided over which path the regime should take in prosecuting the war. Most key leaders favored the continuation of the war. The question was how far should Iran proceed in pursuing its revolutionary goals. Those like Majlis Speaker Rafsanjani favored the toppling of Saddam Hussein as sufficient in



ending the war. These men were known as the minimalists. Others, including Khomeini, were known as the maximalists, and favored the establishment of an Islamic Republic and the ill defined exportation of the revolution into other Islamic countries. Significantly, both groups favored continued armed action beyond the borders of Iran for ideological reasons. The minimalists were just a bit more pragmatic in the ultimate goals they sought.

This meant that the Iranians would continue to pursue the defeat of Iraq through the current Karbala offensives. *Karbala VII* was launched in early March of 1987 in the northern Kurdistan region under Army control. Both regular and IRGC troops captured some strategic heights in bitter mountain fighting. Using infiltration tactics, Pasdaran units overwhelmed the Iraqis and captured the area around Hajj Umran. Again, Iraqi counterattacks failed to dislodge the Iranians from their positions. Unfortunately for the Iranians, this tactical success was not tied to a larger strategic purpose, other than continue to attack. The Basra sector remained quiet until April when *Karbala VIII* was launched, achieving virtually nothing. The Iranians were not conducting their tactical attacks as part of a campaign plan that would cause Iraq to have to commit all of its reserves and therefore weaken them everywhere. Until Iran could cause the Iraqis to expend its reserve forces, it would not capitalize on its population advantage, which it realized was its only physical advantage over Iraq. These sequential, piecemeal, attacks could not put enough pressure on Iraq's limited reserves to make them crack. The Iraqis were able to use superior mobility and rush troops to the threatened sector to defeat the crisis d'jour.

One reason for Iran's failure to coordinate large scale offensive action was the dismal state of logistics in the Iranian armed forces. Internationally isolated, the Iranians were having a hard time finding spare parts for their weapons. They had cannibalized every piece of equipment in their inventory and used captured stocks whenever they could. They scoured the international

arms market for whatever was available. The end result was a varied inventory, with no regularized system of resupply. IRGC units often developed their own logistics systems, and overall the Army and IRGC had two completely separate systems.<sup>12</sup> Given Iran's strategic isolation, the dual command system exacerbated the logistics problems to the point that Iran could not effectively coordinate the limited armor, artillery, and air assets toward a single end.

Despite these adverse conditions, the Iranians continued to conduct offensive operations in the spring of 1987. Turning their attention north, the Iranians coordinated with Kurdish rebels to capture several towns in northern Iraq. The *Karbala IX* offensive began on 13 April and units of the regular Army captured the strategic heights around Suleimaniya.<sup>13</sup> The Iraqis responded by using chemical weapons on the towns in the region believed to be occupied by Kurdish rebels. The Iranians tried to follow up this limited success by starting *Karbala X* and subsequently Operation *Nasr* (Victory) designed to capture a large section of northern Iraq and the hydroelectric dams that supplied Baghdad with much of its power. Again, the Iraqis responded by widening the war, this time by striking the American warship *Stark* in the Persian Gulf. The Iraqis claimed it was an accident, but it did rivet U.S. attention on the Persian Gulf. The IRGC Navy then mined the Persian Gulf and attacked some Kuwaiti tankers in retaliation to Kuwait's support for Iraq. The United States then got involved by reflagging the Kuwaiti tankers and escorting them. IRGC patrol boats foolishly tried to attack the United States naval ships and suffered severe losses.

By the summer of 1987, Iran faced an Iraq rearmed with new Soviet equipment. Iraq had political support of most Arab states and was receiving heavy financial help from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, which helped pay for the new weapons. The American Navy was deployed in force in the Gulf with an eye towards Iran. Iran's oil manufacturing was in

shambles, and it had little hard currency to spend on weapons. It was isolated internationally, with no key allies to provide support. The Iraqis were receiving intelligence support from the West, arms from Russia and Western Europe, and political support from the Arab states (except Syria and Libya). Iranian casualties were heavy and there appeared to be no end to the conflict with Iraq.

The Karbala campaigns had been costly in terms of men and equipment. Iranian losses were estimated at 70,000 against about 10,000 for the Iraqis.<sup>14</sup> Iraq had an advantage in armor of four to one, in aircraft ten to one, and in artillery three to one over Iran.<sup>15</sup> The IRGC had to resort to conscription for the first time and the zeal of its new recruits was clearly not as great as the early volunteers. Even the IRGC commander Rezai began to have doubts about the revolutionary outlook he once championed. Said Rezai,

They had armor and we did not. If our circumstances in the war are not taken into account when comparisons are made with classical warfare, it will be a major error on the part of analysts. We were unarmed infantrymen against the enemy's cavalry. There are few instances in the history of Islam of such a war.<sup>16</sup>

Rezai seemed to be acknowledging the importance of modern weapons on one hand while still trying to justify the continued need for conducting the war along Islamic terms on the other. Rezai now seemed to be trying to justify the way Iran was being **forced** to wage war instead of the way it **chose** to wage war.

Iran seemed to be confused as to which direction it should proceed with the war. An editorial in the Tehran Times stated two options, "either mobilize the full resources of the nation to launch a long, multi-pronged offensive to end the conflict with victory, or continue the present war of attrition."<sup>17</sup> While that debate went on, the minimalists in the Iranian regime were successful in reducing Iran's war aims to the removal of Saddam Hussein, but not the Baath Party.<sup>18</sup> The factional dispute in the IRP reached the point where Khomeini called for

mediation. When this did not work, Khomeini declared the IRP disbanded as of 2 June 1987.<sup>19</sup> Now the Majlis was the only institution not under the executive control of Khomeini.

Iran continued to talk of another round of Karbala offensives in the later part of 1987 and early 1988, but did not have the strength to execute them. At a major strategy conference, the Iranian leadership concluded that the Karbala campaigns had been so costly that no 1988 offensive was possible and that it would take the armed forces five years to retrain before they could attack again.<sup>20</sup> Instead it became preoccupied with the American Navy in the Gulf. Revolutionary Iran regarded the United States as an enemy and many radicals within the IRGC were eager to confront the Americans in combat. The presence of American ships in the Gulf appeared to the Iranians as an American attempt to help Iraq. IRGC naval units continued to spar with the American ships and suffered as a result. Off shore oil platforms as well as mine laying ships and patrol boats were sunk in a series of actions and counter actions, none of which were to Iran's advantage. When another tanker hit a mine in the Persian Gulf in April of 1988, the Iranians braced themselves for an American reprisal. While the Iranians focused on events in the Gulf, the Iraqis were preparing to take the offensive in an effort to regain their lost territory.

After conducting extensive rehearsals in the early spring of 1988, the Iraqis launched a multiple division attack to retake the Faw peninsula. On 16 April, the Iraqis struck the Iranian defensive positions with armor, artillery, air attacks, chemical weapons and heliborne assaults. The combined arms assault caught the Iranians off guard, and they quickly retreated over the Shatt al Arab back into Iran. Two days later, American warplanes damaged another oil platform in retaliation for the mining incident. When the Iranians moved naval units out off Bandar Abbas, the American Navy responded by sinking one frigate and severely damaging another.

Over half of Iran's Navy was now out of action. Cumulative losses and continued war caused Iranian civilian morale to plummet. Calls for further mobilization to fight the twin threats of advancing Iraqis and imperialist Americans were not well received by the people.<sup>21</sup> Calls for more volunteers went unheeded.

Iran was now in crisis. Despite its lack of equipment and spare parts, it had managed to maintain the initiative in the war since 1982. Now that was no longer possible. What Iran had counted on during the early days of the war was the power of zeal in committing troops to offensive actions that, although not always militarily successful, kept the pressure on Iraq. Now, Iran no longer held the initiative, and its ability to rally its own citizens to provide the necessary spirit to fight was becoming questionable. Ominously, the Iraqis started taking large number of prisoners and draft dodging was becoming more popular, with many young Iranians avoiding conscription by fleeing to Turkey.

From mid June 1988, the Iranian regime became more heavy handed in dealing with its internal problems. The disbanding of the IRP silenced some of the moderates in the government, but Khomeini went further, declaring that the "the God-given absolute mandate to govern was the important of the divine commandments and has priority over all other derivative commandments- even prayer, fasting and pilgrimage to Mecca."<sup>22</sup> This is a remarkable statement in that it meant the rule of Islamic law as governed by the sharia was superseded by the regime's own interpretation. The government became more repressive, summarily arresting and punishing those in violation of the rationing rules and those accused of hoarding food or conducting anti-Islamic business practices. The Majlis elections in April settled nothing with tempers rising on both the moderate and radical sides over what course of action to take in the war.

On 25 May, the Iraqis staged another offensive, using non persistent nerve agent and heavy artillery to blast the Iranians out of Shalamche. The Iraqis took a page out the Pasdaran playbook and preceded the attack with commando units that infiltrated the Iranian positions. Unlike the Iranians, the Iraqis followed the infiltration with armor and air attacks, which overwhelmed the Iranians in just eight hours.<sup>23</sup> The brutal heat discouraged many Iranians from donning their protective masks and casualties to the chemical attacks were higher than before.

Responding to the recent loss, Khomeini reiterated the ideological aspects of the struggle, "The combatants must continue their fight by depending on their faith in God and their weapons. The outcome of the war will be decided on th battlefields, not through negotiations."<sup>24</sup> In early June, Khomeni finally ordered the creation of a field command that included both Army and IRGC forces under Rafsanjani as new Commander in Chief. Earlier in the war, Rafsanjani had rejected the idea of a unified command saying, "The Army is a long-established and classical organization, whereas the Revolutionary Guards Corps is revolutionary and self motivated."<sup>25</sup> Now feeling the pressure of the Iraqi attacks, the Iranians knew they could no longer afford two separate military forces; but it was too late to unify their forces and have a meaningful effect on the war.

In late June 1988, the Iraqis launched another lightning assault, this time on the Majnoon Islands east of Basra, to eject the Iranians from the area. Again the Iraqis used a combination of maneuver, fire power and chemical weapons to overwhelm the Iranians. A brigade of paratroopers was dropped into Iran to isolate the defenders, while massed artillery smashed into the defenders. In only four hours the Iranian defenses were broken and large numbers of prisoners were taken. In July, the Iraqis retook much of the mountainous region in the north.

Iran called these defeats, “temporary setbacks” and vowed to fight on. But behind this facade, senior Iranian leaders were convinced that the war needed to end.

A meeting of 14 July of top political, religious and military leaders led to a recommendation that Iran accept the U.N. resolution calling for a cease fire and the return to the pre-war borders. This recommendation was passed on to the Majlis and the Assembly of Experts. Both bodies endorsed it and forwarded it through Rafsanjani to Khomeini for approval. Saying that accepting this proposal was “worse than swallowing poison,” Khomeini reluctantly agreed. Iranians were stunned, as no ranking leader within the government had seriously advocated accepting peace. Khomeini explained the decision two days later in an address to the nation saying, "I consider it to be in the interest of the revolution and the system at this juncture."<sup>26</sup>

Now it was Iraq's turn to expand its war aims. Iraq demanded guaranteed access through the Shatt al Arab before a cease fire went into place. Actually, Saddam intended to press home his military advantage and used this delay as a pretext. Iraqi forces continued to attack in late July, advancing forty miles into Iran in the Khuzistan area. This set off another wave of patriotism in Iran, and another group of volunteers went to the front; this time to save Iran. In bloody fighting, the Iranians actually threw back the Iraqis in two days of fighting. Iraq finally accepted the cease fire proposal in August of 1988. After eight long years of war and 700,000 total casualties for both sides, the war was over.

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<sup>1</sup>Hiro, Dilip, The Longest War, The Iran-Iraq Military Conflict, (London: Routledge, 1991), 190.

<sup>2</sup>Dingeman and Jupa, 75.

<sup>3</sup>Efraim Karsh,, The Iran-Iraq War: A Military Analysis, Adelphi Papers, ISS, (Spring 1987),31.

- <sup>4</sup>Pelletiere, 18.
- <sup>5</sup>Hiro, 175
21. <sup>6</sup>Stephen C. Pelletiere and Douglas Johnson, "Lessons Learned: The Iran Iraq War," 20-
- <sup>7</sup>Hiro, 171.
- <sup>8</sup>Pelletiere, 21.
- <sup>9</sup>Hiro, 180.
- <sup>10</sup>Robin Wright, In the Name of God, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 156.
- <sup>11</sup>Hiro, 183.
- <sup>12</sup>Pelletier, 23.
- <sup>13</sup>Hiro, 185.
- <sup>14</sup>Pelletiere, 23.
- <sup>15</sup>Shahram Chubin, "From Stalemate to Cease-fire," The Iran-Iraq War, Edited by Efraim Karsh (New York: St Martin's Press, 1989), 18.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>17</sup>Hiro, 189.
- <sup>18</sup>Chubin, 20.
- <sup>19</sup>Guardian, London, 3 June 1987.
- <sup>20</sup>Pelletiere, 23.
- <sup>21</sup>Hiro, 205.
- <sup>22</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>23</sup>Pelletiere, 24.
- <sup>24</sup>Hiro, 207.



<sup>25</sup>Ibid.

<sup>26</sup>Hiro, 243.

## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSION

Emotion cannot be divorced from war. The struggle of life and death in war demands an emotional investment from those who are engaged in it. Nations that can harness the zeal of their people and soldiers make formidable adversaries. Revolutions can unleash powerful emotions of the people. In the case of Iran, the 1979 Revolution was tied emotionally to the purist traditions of the nation's majority religion, Shiite Islam. The combination of resentment to the Shah's elitist imperialism, coupled with the appeal to the dispossessed within the society, was both alluring and powerful. The revolutionary clerics offered a radically new path for their faithful, but one that was also stepped in the collective history of the Shiites in Iran. They offered to solve both the problems in the physical world and pave the way for the true believers in the afterlife. This religious ideology created a dynamic energy within Iran. When war broke out with Iraq, this energy level helped sustain Iran through economic, political and military conditions that might have broken other states. Certainly, patriotism played a key role in firing the emotions of the Iranians to defend their country, but the revolutionary ideology also added to the zeal that kept the war effort going, beyond the point where mere patriotism would sustain them.

However, in modern war, it is equally vital to be able to integrate all weapon systems and tactics into a coherent plan and then execute those plans. This requires a high degree of military professionalism. The Iranian Army that remained following the Shah's ouster and the

purges had a long way to go to become professional in a practical sense. Corruption, internal politics and favoritism all hampered the formation of a truly professional force. Nevertheless, the Army still had the basic organization, equipment and doctrine to fight a war with Iraq. But since the Army was never trusted by the revolutionary regime, its limited tradition of the professional approach to war was as suspect as the Shah's generals. The clerics could never truly trust the Army as an institution because it was the instrument by which the Shah came to power and maintained it at the expense of an Islamic society. They also feared that if the Army was seen as the savior of the nation, someone within its ranks could come to power like Napoleon in the French Revolution.

Because the Army was suspect, so were its views on waging war as a professional force. The clerics took control of Iran based on the power of ideas and therefore stressed the same theme when it came to waging war. The spirituality of the individual Moslem would take precedence over the military professionalism of the old order and zeal would replace classical tactics. For the revolutionaries, this was a victory of the heart over the head, a phenomenon common in many revolutions

Historically, the Iranians had several examples of revolutionary regimes balancing ideological fervor with professional military competence. The Bolsheviks were similar to the Iranians in that both new regimes had to overcome the institutionalized bias of a conservative, anti-revolutionary military, while at the same time fight a war. The Bolsheviks did it by coercing Czarist officers to fight for them. Cromwell's New Model Army was at once professional and motivated by religious forces, reflecting the unbending will of its commander. Its ultimate goal was not, however, the establishment of a religious government, which is what Iran sought in Iraq. The Waffen SS represented an ideological military for the Nazis in the same

way that the IRGC did for Iran. The difference was that combat SS units were integrated into the overall German war effort, while the IRGC operated independently. In all of these cases, the zeal of the ideologically driven troops was tied to how successful they were on the battlefield. But zeal could not sustain the war effort by itself indefinitely.

The Iranians utilized several types of zeal during the long war with Iraq. In the early days when Iraq first invaded, many Iranians fought for patriotism in defense of their country. Others were fired by the idea of revolution itself, and still others by religious motivation. The pursuit of zeal by the Iranian regime lost much of its patriotic appeal once Iran evicted the Iraqis from Iranian soil. When the clerics expand their war aims to include the establishment of an Islamic republic in Iraq, they then relied on religious-ideological motivation as their primary weapon. For several years, units of the IRGC used this to motivate their soldiers in desperate infantry attacks on the entrenched Iraqis.

As the war dragged on, this zeal started to wane. There were several benchmark events that highlighted the fall of zeal. For the IRGC the need to resort to conscription in 1987 and the huge losses they suffered during the ill-fated Karbala offensives, were key turning points. Too many well trained, battle-hardened, ideologically committed, Islamic soldiers died without achieving final victory. Iran could not replace them, and Pasdaran had no tradition of professionalism to fall back on. Having lived by ideological motivation, they then started to die by it.

Iranian patriotism did reappear once Iran accepted the U. N. cease-fire resolution when the Iraqis continued to attack into Iran. Volunteers again poured into the front lines to eject the Iraqis from Iran. The wheel had come full circle with the desire to defend the homeland stronger than the Iraqi desire to gain ground. Iran did not consistently maintain the proper mixture of

professionalism and zeal throughout the war as did the Waffen SS. It could not win the war without this proper mix and was forced to settle for heavy casualties and eventual stalemate.

Iran believed that as a result of its successful revolution that it had found a new and promising way of waging war. Its revolution in military affairs was not a throw back to ancient times, but represented a new way based on old ideals. Fouad Ajami, an IRGC commander, captured this by saying:

We think of great crusades, of a powerful desert wind devastating the achievements of progress, of society's being dragged back to the middle ages. But things may not be what they seem. People summon the spirits of the past to help them achieve very precise souls.<sup>1</sup>

The clerics clearly believed that their revolution was not a throwback to ancient times, but the future of Islam. In this belief the technological was replaced by the human. The individual soldier, imbued with the necessary amount of religious zeal, would overcome any professional deficiencies in warfare. The theory seemed to be validated in the early days of the war. After the initial Iraqi invasion took the Iranians by surprise, the individual Iranian soldier, though out-gunned, fought ferociously. Instead of reading this as a natural expression of patriotic emotion, the Iranians attributed it to revolutionary zeal and religious faith. In fact, it had elements of all three.

The revolutionary regime counted on this zeal at all levels of war. At the strategic level, Iran isolated itself from the rest of the world. It derided both superpowers as corrupt and evil, and instead adopted a course that stressed complete self reliance. In reality, the Iranians found that it had to bargain with the rest of the world for needed spare parts, equipment and supplies, but tried to sustain its war effort with internal resources. However, the Iranians were successful in translating the martyrdom concept into a revolutionary ideology by calling upon its people to make sacrifices to sustain the war effort. Despite a battered economy, international isolation and

heavy losses, the Iranian masses continued to send their sons to the front and endure economic hardship at home. Most Iranian soldiers were volunteers, and many eagerly joined the IRGC troops to demonstrate both their patriotism and religious commitment. The concept of martyrdom had strong roots in Shiite Iran and was used to maximum effect by the ruling clerics. In this cultural context, the dying power of martyrdom can be a more powerful force than the killing power of professionalism. It was a force used at many level by the Iranians.

At the tactical level, the Iranians stressed the human over the technological. Some of this was a rationalization of the existing conditions. Since they did not have the numbers and types of new equipment the Iraqis did, it was convenient to emphasize the superior cause they were fighting for over the more machine oriented Iraqi armed forces. But the revolutionary zeal the Iranians professed was not just a matter of convenience. There was sincere belief in the cause they were fighting for. Religiously and culturally, the concepts of martyrdom and suffering in Shiism provided a foundation that the clerics in the IRP forged into a ideology.

The IRGC embodied this principle and its tactics were successful at times. The infiltration tactics of the Pasdaran were at once revolutionary (for Iran) and professional. They reflected the essence of elan, that is, the desire to attack, which reflected the IRGC emphasis on the individual who is divinely inspired. At the same time, infiltration tactics require teamwork, technical proficiency and discipline, which are all indicators of professionalism.

Small unit training became an IRGC hallmark, especially in preplanned operations. The integration of Basij charges into these operations also reflected some detailed planning and execution. These tactics had a place in the Iran-Iraq War and could have been much more successful had they been integrated into plans at the operational level which integrated the Army's mobile forces.

It was at this, the operational level, that the Revolution and the professionalism of arms parted company. The formation of the IRGC was clearly a political, and therefore, revolutionary act. Unlike the German example of the Waffen SS, the IRGC remained independent of the Army for virtually the entire war. The two separate, distinct command structures of the Army and the IRGC doomed the Iranians to operational failure on the battlefield. Not matter how righteous the cause at the strategic, or political level, nor how many successful tactical engagements the Paskaran won, Iran could not achieve the decisive victory it sought without the formation of clear, unified campaign plans. Time and again the IRGC and the Army would launch separate, uncoordinated efforts on different fronts, only to have the Iraqis shift precious reserves to meet each individual threat. This prevented the Iranians from using their population advantage in a decisive manner.

On occasion, the Iranians demonstrated they knew how to coordinate the efforts of the Army and IRGC, as they did at Bostan in 1981 when the Army landed troops by helicopter behind Iraqi lines and the IRGC launched a frontal infiltration and human wave attack. Lessons such as these were not institutionalized as mistrust between the Army and IRGC remained the rule. Severe logistics constraints alone should have forced the two organizations to work together, however it did not happen. Only in the waning days of the war, when Iraq was winning on every front, were the two commands joined at the highest field level. By then it was too late, and a political settlement was necessary to save the Revolution.

The Iranian use of zeal, either by choice or necessity, is not unique to the Middle East or to Islam. Revolutionary movements which are inferior technically to their adversaries must rely on the spirit of their warriors to compensate for the lack of equipment. It is a short walk from this necessity to a firm belief that it is a chosen path. Revolutionary movements, especially those

with a historic emphasis on sacrifice and suffering, have a cultural foundation to readily accept the ideology of the human over the technological.

After fighting the British for centuries, Irish nationalists adopted such a mantra during the turn of the twentieth century. Years of futility in opposing British rule turned the remaining nationalists into ideologues who believed that they must make a public sacrifice to reinvigorate the movement. The Easter Rising of 1916 in Dublin was not so much an effort to psychically overthrow the British, as to fight and die in the attempt. During the Easter Rising, several hundred Irish nationalists made no attempt to seize the infrastructures of power such as the telegraph, armories or police headquarters. Instead, they barricaded themselves in one of the largest public buildings in Dublin, the General Post Office, and waited for the British to attack.

The uprising failed and many nationalists were executed. It was these executions, not the rebellion itself, that inflamed the Irish public and resulted in the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1921. James Connolly, one of the rebel leaders, said this shortly before his execution, "Victory belongs to those who can endure the most suffering, not those who can inflict the most." (This sounds strikingly familiar to the clerics statements in Iran.) The influence of Catholicism, the long period of British oppression and the recognition of technical inferiority, created an ideology of martyrdom that became an effective tool for the Irish nationalists. Most of these men probably knew nothing of Islam, Shiism or Iran, yet they had much in common.

In the future, the possession of advanced weapons and technological know how will be no guarantee of quick, or even eventual, victory. An army's emphasis on mass will compensate for the lack of technology by emphasizing the human spirit. If the leaders of such movements can link this emphasis on the human will to religious or cultural history, they will create an



ideology that produces sustained battlefield performance beyond what is considered rational.

For those who believe in this ideology, it is not an irrational belief, but merely a spiritual reflection of the immense potential that can be unleashed in a single human being. When many such believers are linked together, they may not be able to secure quick victory, but they can make any conflict more bloody, vicious, and prolonged. If, perchance, they link their ideology to professional battlefield conduct, then they truly will represent a formidable foe.

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<sup>1</sup>Shahram Chubin, "Iran and the War: From Stalemate to Cease-fire," The Iran-Iraq War, Edited by Efraim Karsh (New York: St Martin's Press, 1989), 176.

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